REVIEW OF *ACADEMIC INTERACTIONS: COMMUNICATING ON CAMPUS*
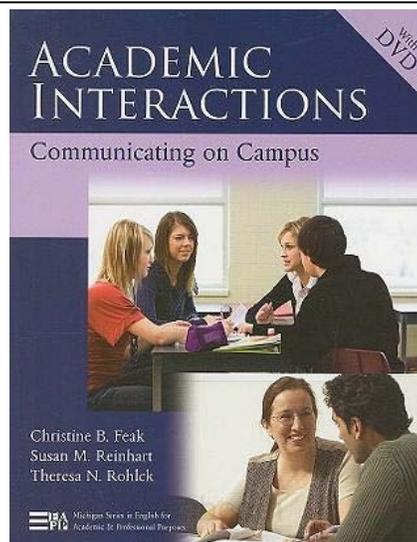
Review by Heather Weger, Georgetown University

The internationalization of higher education has seen an increasing number of students pursuing academic interests in the U.S. (deWit, 2002). Such learners will likely face a variety of challenges—including not only the need to participate in the academic discourse of a particular discipline, such as the natural sciences, marketing, or legal studies (Bhatia, 2002), but also the need to manage social adjustment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Moreover, the U.S. academic context itself is a particular community of practice (Belcher, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991), characterized by norms of engagement and classroom expectations that may differ widely from the experiences international students bring with them (Casanave & Li, 2008; Shiraev & Boyd, 2008). Designed to raise ESL learners' awareness about such norms of engagement, *Academic Interactions* seeks to equip prospective U.S.-based students with "some of the basic communication skills they need to be successful in a college or university setting" (p. vii).

The target audience of the book is high-intermediate to advanced level ESL learners. Its explicit academic focus means that it is best suited for college-preparatory programs. In fact, some activities presuppose access to professors and matriculated university students, further indicating that the book is intended for learners "who are either in an intensive academic English program or have newly begun their academic careers at a U.S. community college, college, or university at either the undergraduate or graduate level" (p. vii). The greatest strength of the book is its carefully designed textual analysis tasks drawn largely from the MICASE database (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase), a publicly available resource of authentic "academic speech from across the University of Michigan campus" (p. vii). While the use of authentic speech samples does not inherently make an approach pedagogically sound (Gilmore, 2007), the book is successful because of the tasks that accompany each excerpt and draw ESL learners' attention below the surface theme of the unit to consider and practice specific language points—including mining the authentic transcripts to study functional grammar features (e.g., use of ellipsis), new vocabulary, and pragmatic appropriateness (e.g., how to politely decline advice from an authority figure). Though the book includes other authentic sources, the MICASE transcripts are the backbone of the book; they constitute a majority of the tasks in the five units that focus on oral interactions. (One unit focuses on email correspondence and includes authentic sample emails to professors from non-native English speakers.)

Accompanying the text is a DVD that offers content-based illustrations of the themes of a given unit. The DVD is based on role-playing, and thus is not entirely authentic. However, the actors were not given pre-determined scripts; instead a situation was outlined for them (e.g., the need to visit one's advisor during office hours to discuss changing majors), and the actors improvised the scene. At first glance, some of the scenes seem overly simplistic for the target audience of "high-intermediate to advanced students" (p. vii), but they may serve as useful homework or independent activities that can supplement the core lessons. Substantial suggestions for ways learners might use the DVD to examine specific language functions (including transcripts and lesson ideas) are accessible online (http://www.press.umich.edu/esl/tm/academicinteractions/).

Additionally, these DVD scenes also provide the source for most of the book's pronunciation foci that are found at the end of each unit (only the email unit includes a pronunciation focus not based on the DVD). For example, one DVD scene introduced in Unit 2 shows students (actors who are improvising) discussing dorm life. To reinforce the interview genre introduced in the chapter, the pronunciation task involves transcribing a segment of this scene and analyzing it for question intonation. In Unit 4, which includes a focus on accepting and rejecting advice, recommendations, or suggestions, students analyze another DVD scene and focus on the phoneme /T/, which is particularly relevant for distinguishing a negative expression (*can't*) from a positive one (*can*). The pronunciation foci of the other four units, however, seem less inherently linked to the communicative target of the unit. For example, Unit 3 focuses on email correspondence, a written communicative event, yet the authors include a pronunciation focus that asks learners to consider how to pronounce acronyms. The final unit targets class discussions and presentations, and it is unclear how the pronunciation focus on consonant clusters is particularly relevant for that theme.

Each unit is comprised of multiple tasks that will take varying amounts of time to complete. Though there are no explicit timing guidelines in the book, individual tasks will likely take between 5 minutes and an hour, depending on the task type. For example, the initial tasks of each unit, focusing on brainstorming or schema activation, may take only 5 minutes of class time; however, the MICASE transcript analysis tasks will probably take 30 minutes or more. Other tasks include grammar practice (5-10 minutes) and planning and conducting interviews (30-60 minutes). Though the DVD scenes are short (all but one are less than 6 minutes), transcribing and analyzing them for each unit's pronunciation task will take considerably longer; this task lends itself to independent work or homework.

Unit 1 contains 14 tasks and focuses on common American surnames (tasks 1-8), places (task 9), and locations and directions (tasks 10-14). Though these themes seem to be at a level too low for the target audience of high-intermediate to advanced learners, the tasks of the unit can be exploited for three major purposes: first, the opening tasks may serve as good ice-breakers for a new class of learners who might use them as a means of getting to know each other; second, once the unit shifts to "Locations and Directions," the unit introduces learners to working with the MICASE transcripts via close textual analyses (since such close textual analysis may be an unfamiliar task for many learners, it may be useful to train learners by using the familiar theme of locations and directions); and third, the final task of the unit allows learners to explore the campus or community in which they are currently living and studying through a group project and informal presentation.

The 21 tasks of Unit 2 deal with raising learners' awareness about life as college/university students in the U.S. Learners consider such issues as housing, homework, and means of contacting their professor. The viewpoint of the college/university professor is also present in this unit through MICASE transcript analysis and DVD scenes intended to broadly describe what a "typical" day for a professor might entail. The unit also introduces standards of email protocol (although this is covered in depth in Unit 3). Students' expectations regarding homework and grading are also raised. As in Unit 1, many tasks again focus on unpacking MICASE transcripts in terms of several language foci—including understanding idiomatic expressions and interpreting speaker intent. Building on the work of Boxer (1993), one

pragmatic language focus of the unit concerns how students can use complaining about homework as a means "to establish rapport or connections with other students" (p. 41). This unit also introduces learners to the interview genre, which prepares them to complete two interview tasks: interviewing a matriculated college/university student and someone who works in a student service office on their campus.

With a focus on email protocol, Unit 3 is the only unit in the book solely targeting a written mode of communication. The unit addresses mechanics of email, such as appropriate subject headings, greetings, and closings. The strength of the unit, however, is that it addresses the complexities that arise from the hybrid nature of email correspondence. As noted by the authors, "email correspondence has features of both spoken and more formal written English, which sometimes poses a challenge when it comes to vocabulary and grammar choices" (p. 58; see also Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). The authors outline two pragmatic heuristics to help learners manage these challenges: Grice's Conversational Maxims (1975) and Leech's Maxims of Politeness (1983). The unit avoids the pitfall of being overly theoretical because the theories are succinctly presented, and the accompanying 19 tasks of the unit guide learners in applying the theories' principles to the evaluation and construction of emails. Specific pragmatic foci include how to ask for letters of recommendation, set up appointments, and apologize for absences or missed assignments. In short, the treatment of the linguistic theories is reasonably positioned within the learners' zone of proximal development (Brophy, 1999; Vygotsky, 1986) and provides useful tools for learning how to manage the balance of formal and informal tenor (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) that characterize student-instructor email correspondence. Participating in online course discussions is briefly mentioned, yet no tasks are designed around this potentially important area of course participation. As online education grows in popularity, this lacuna may need greater attention in future editions of the book.

Unit 4 consists of 17 tasks and focuses on how students interact appropriately with professors and advisors during office hours. As in Units 1 and 2, MICASE transcripts are used to illustrate specific language points. For example, in task 7, students are presented with three examples of office hour interactions. They are asked to evaluate the three in terms of content (why are learners visiting office hours), idiomatic expressions (e.g., 'alright' versus 'alrighty' versus 'all right'), and discourse markers (e.g., the functions of words of such as 'mhm' and 'yep'). Other tasks in the unit focus on different means of explaining the need for help with homework assignments and the use of modal verbs and quasi-modals in asking for and receiving advice; each language point is supported by a MICASE example. Additionally, this unit has several particularly useful DVD scenes. For example, the three scenes for "Appointments with an Advisor" might be mined for useful vocabulary (e.g., *credits, prerequisite, elective, have space, off track*).

The 14 tasks of Unit 5 concern classroom interactions and focus specifically on the functions of questions (asked by both instructors and students) and narratives in classroom lectures. For example, in task 3, students examine MICASE transcripts to identify instructor questions and consider whether they are rhetorical; students then evaluate different strategies for asking questions when they have not understood part of a lecture—including brainstorming expressions for interrupting. Other tasks in the unit focus on how to hedge a response, how a wh-cleft functions, and how to understand ellipsis; MICASE transcripts illustrate each of these language features. Also, this unit contains a particularly useful DVD scene, "Gestures, Facial Expressions, and Body Language." This scene shows three speakers discussing cross-cultural variations in non-verbal cues—including different meanings conveyed through the use of eyebrows, pointing, and other hand gestures. Since nonverbal cues are of critical importance in interpreting face-to-face discourse, which is the focus of units 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6, it might be useful to begin the course with this task.

The final unit focuses on two speech events: formal discussions (part 1, tasks 1-11) and panel presentations (part 2, tasks 12-27). Again MICASE transcripts illustrate language cues that might be useful for accomplishing both speech events. In part 1, learners are introduced to the structure of a discussion—including summarizing a topic, developing discussion questions, controlling turn-taking, and

listening actively. Part 1 ends with each learner taking on the role of a discussion leader. In part 2, learners are scaffolded through the process of developing their own panel presentations. This includes the planning stages (e.g., how to develop a topic and determine presenter roles) and the execution stages (e.g., how to transition between presenters, how to manage question-answer sessions, and how to develop visual aids). Two sets of comparisons in the DVD scenes of this unit may provide good discussion starters: one set contrasts how a group of students negotiates the division of labor for a group project; the other set contrasts more/less successful uses of visual aids.

Academic Interactions has many strong features. First, the approach is grounded in authentic speech samples, whose use has long been considered a cornerstone of sound pedagogy (Brown, 2001). However, the mere inclusion of authentic materials does not account for the success of the textbook. Rather, it is the carefully constructed tasks which guide learners to consider and practice the organizational structure, language features, and pragmatic appropriateness of each authentic excerpt. Another strong point is that the book is fairly comprehensive in addressing likely modes of interaction in a student's academic life: addressing both in class and out of class interactions with professors and classmates, as well as informal and formal media of communication. A third strength is that the text is highly interactive. Questions instructing students to consider language usage or to link the examples in the book to their own experiences are embedded within the descriptive paragraphs of each unit, and almost every task assumes pair or group discussion. Another strength of the book is that the authors "have attempted to use published research as much as possible to inform [their] materials development" (p. vii). Accordingly, units 2-6 explicitly cite published research or statistics to prove the relevance of the units' themes to successful academic interactions. Finally, teaching aids (Instructor's Notes and supplemental suggestions for using the DVD) are available online (http://www.press.umich.edu/esl/tm/academicinteractions/).

Though this text might well serve as the foundational text for a general academic preparation class, there are two caveats to consider in planning how to use the book with a class. First, there are a large number of tasks in each unit (from 14-27). While each individual task may not be particularly time consuming, almost every task assumes pair or group discussion. Thus, it seems best that the vast majority of the work be done during class time, with the exceptions of preparing for major projects (e.g., Units 1 and 6) and working through each unit's pronunciation focus. Although learners can be assigned a set of tasks to complete with a partner outside of class, instructors must then determine how to assess the completion of the assignments, most of which are oral (the only unit that produces a substantive amount of written reflection is the unit on email correspondence). Second, and more importantly, the close textual analysis of transcripts will likely be a new skill for most students, further problematizing the assignment of many of the tasks as homework, at least until learners have been trained. Working with the transcripts during class time is one caveat the authors themselves are fully aware of as they note that careful planning is necessary in order to avoid not being able to complete the analysis of a transcript by the end of a class: "Because momentum is hard to regain, we plan strategic stopping points in the unit rather than find ourselves with a lengthy transcript only 'half-done' [at the end of a class period]" (p. x). The book does not provide a guideline of how much time each transcript analysis is expected to take, presumably because this may vary greatly depending on a particular class.

To address these practical timing parameters, an instructor may need to carefully select a subset of tasks for each unit, or consider teaching only some units. Unit 1, for example, has a focus on American surnames, places, and locations/directions; these themes may not be as relevant as the need to understand email or office hour protocols for the target audience of high-intermediate to advanced students. Timing constraints also suggest that prudent use of the DVD during class time is warranted; viewing the DVD scenes might best be assigned as homework or independent study. Careful consideration of these caveats will help instructors unlock the benefits of this book for their learners. Specifically, ESL learners will gain not only awareness of, but also practice in how language functions to accomplish academic needs (such as participating in class and preparing for group work with classmates). Although finding the right balance

for one's class might be a challenge when using the book for the first time, it will be worth the effort for both student and instructor.

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