

Academic English at tertiary level: What, why and how

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Abstract. Academic writing is arguably the most important language skill to tertiary students, especially to English-major ones, whose grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignments, academic reports, term examinations and graduation theses. However, reality has proved the difficulties of Vietnamese learners in applying the right level of formality, lexical dense, and objectivity. The article, with the hope to help the tertiary English-major students improve their skill of writing academic English, first deals with an overview on academic English and the necessity of equipping them with knowledge of academic English. It will also go on to put forward some strategies for effective writing academic English.

1. Introduction

Language proficiency, especially in writing at tertiary level, is a universal problem. During the years of teaching writing for students of English at Quinhon University, I have realized that the majority of students have concentrated on such criteria of writing as grammar, ideas, organization, coherence and unity. However, the academic factor, the formal English, seems to be fallen into oblivion. The following quoted topic sentence from a second-year-student's piece of writing illustrates the weakness:

"You know, we all have ever told lies either for our personal benefits or for others' [...]".

Obviously, the above sentence is grammatically correct. However, there exist some academic problems. The discourse marker "you know", which is often employed in conversations, as well as the assertive language

"we all" makes the sentence sound untentative and informal.

The illustration partly proves the complexity of writing academic English and the necessity of students' basic knowledge of academic English. This paper provides a brief outline of what academic English is, why it is necessary and how to improve it. It is believed to be useful to tertiary English-major students who are learning to write English academic reports, assignments or theses as the final target.

2. Development

2.1. Academic English defined

Academic English, according to Stephen et al [1], is the language people use to communicate outside of and unrelated to any certain context. People describe and manipulate abstract ideas, analyze their thoughts and solve

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problems; the context provides few or no clues about what the communication means. In Gersten et al's point of view [2], academic English is the language of school-based learning and extended, reasoned discourse. Writing academic English refers to a formal style of expression, namely a formal tone, use of the third-person rather than first-person perspective, clear focus on the issue or topic rather than the author's opinion, and precise word choice. Writers employing the academic style avoid jargon, slang, and abbreviations. Academic writing, when used appropriately, presents a polished and professional image.

It can be said that academic writing is linear, which has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions. Its objective is to inform rather than entertain. Therefore, it is in the standard written form of English.

2.2. Academic English vs daily spoken English

Academic English is, for the most part, a written language. In general, it is confined to the realm of the serious: textbooks, academic or technical works, and most essays at university. Academic English tends to be impersonal and precise, and often uses long, carefully constructed sentences; the formal writer will avoid contractions and abbreviations, and will use a more specialized and complex vocabulary than that employed in everyday speech.

One must, however, beware of excess academic writing. It can easily become incomprehensible because it is too convoluted or wordy. In recent years the proliferation of jargon has become altogether too general. Despite its sophistication, formal language must remain clear.

Daily spoken English is the language spoken by most people every day. While educated speakers retain their knowledge of formal rules, they're more relaxed about grammar and less concerned with vocabulary

when they're engaged in ordinary conversation. In everyday English, sentences tend to be shorter, and the formal punctuation of the semi-colon and colon seem to be avoided. Contractions and the first person are acceptable.

In order to assist tertiary English-major students with the production of academic pieces of writing competently, teachers should draw a distinction between academic English and daily spoken English. Let's consider the ways the two varieties of English are used by two students:

Spoken English: *Gimme it (pointing to a cell phone). I gotta go.*

Academic English: *Could you please give me the cell phone because I have to leave?*

Notice how context-rich spoken English is. The student need only point to the cell phone to convey his/her meaning to his/her friend. In contrast, notice that informal expressions such as "gimme" and "gotta" are absent in academic English and that academic English is grammatically correct and is characterized by subordination (because I have to leave) rather than short, simple sentences. The academic English version does not depend on context to convey meaning (Scarcella [3]). Those who master academic English know its phonological features, including stress, intonation, and sound patterns. They also have a command of vocabulary, everyday words, content-specific terms, know sentence structure and morphology. Also, they know how to use grade-appropriate complex sentences, such as passive structures.

It can be said that the difference between academic English and spoken English is not a difference between correct and incorrect, but a difference of what is known as register. A register is a variety of language related to a particular subject matter or area of activity, a set of words and expressions as well as syntactical features that may be said to characterise that specific area of language. There are many registers: technical, academic, mathematical, scientific, etc., we can also speak of a "formal" and "informal" register in

English, but in writing academic English, it would be normal to draw most of the vocabulary and expressions from the formal register. This entails avoiding colloquial (everyday) or slang expressions in academic writing assignments.

2.3. *The necessity of teaching academic English to tertiary English - major students in Vietnam*

Academic writing is arguably the most important language skill at university because students' grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignments, tests and examinations or graduation thesis (Leki and Carson [4]). Therefore, equipping tertiary English-major students with knowledge of academic writing is really essential. The reality of teaching and learning reveals the teachers' improper emphasis on and the students' vague knowledge of writing academic English, which is partly one of the factors resulting in the poor ability of using academic style among English-major students. In fact, in most universities in Vietnam, the official lectures on academic style are not usually delivered until the seventh semester, that is, just before students finish university. So when being questioned "What do you know about Academic English?", 27 out of 50 second-year students of English, who finished 120 periods of writing at their universities and covered skills of writing at sentence level (in the first semester) and of functional writing (in the second semester) had similar responds reflecting their vague knowledge of the issue. Most of them are unable to identify the distinction between spoken and written academic style as well as have no ideas of the features of these types. Consequently, when they are required to write a paragraph (in the third and the fourth semester) or an essay (in the sixth and seventh semester) they fail to produce formal pieces of writing. To improve the reality, the knowledge of academic style should be introduced in the second semester so that students have opportunities to practice the skill in the five or six remaining semesters.

Such limitations partially explain the reason why teaching academic English to Vietnamese university English-major students is an essential issue.

2.4. *Some suggested strategies for teaching academic English to tertiary English - major students in Vietnam*

From the above discussion of objective and subjective factors and from my own teaching experience, I would like to suggest some strategies to help University teachers raise English major students' competence of writing academic English.

a) Teaching features of academic English

There are six main features of academic writing that students should know. To some extent, academic writing is complex, formal, objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible.

Complexity

Academic English is relatively more complex than spoken language (Biber [5], Halliday and Hasan [6]). Grammatically, it has more subordinate clauses, more "that/to" complement clauses, more long sequences of prepositional phrases, more attributive adjectives and more passives than spoken language. Lexically, academic writing often requires longer, more complex words and phrases. That is, it has more nominalisations, more noun based phrases, and more lexical variation. This kind of writing is lexically dense compared to spoken language - It has proportionately more lexical words than grammatical words.

Commonly used techniques in academic writing include subordinate clauses, complements clauses, sequences of prepositional phrases, participals, passive verbs, lexical density, lexical complexity, nominalization, noun-based phrases, modification of noun phrases, attributive adjectives.

Formality

Academic writing is relatively formal. In general this means that in an academic piece of

writing, colloquial words and expressions should be avoided. Following are some examples.

- Colloquial words and expressions: "*stuff*", "*a lot of*", "*thing*", "*sort of*",...

- Abbreviated forms: "*can't*", "*doesn't*", "*shouldn't*", ...

- Two word verbs: "*put off*", "*bring up*", ...

- Sub-headings, numbering and bullet-points in formal writings - but use them in reports.

- Asking questions.

Objectivity

Academic language is in general objective rather than personal. It, therefore, has fewer words that refer to the writer or the reader. This means that the main emphasis should be on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make, rather than you. For that reason, academic writing tends to use nouns (and adjectives), rather than verbs (and adverbs).

This is related to the basic nature of academic study and academic writing, in particular. Nobody really wants to know what you "think" or "believe". They want to know what you have studied and learned and how this has led you to your various conclusions. The thoughts and beliefs should be based on your lectures, reading, discussion and research and it is important to make this clear.

- Avoid words like "*I*", "*me*", "*myself*",...

A reader will normally assume that any idea not referenced is your own. It is therefore unnecessary to make this explicit.

Don't write: "*In my opinion, this a very interesting study*".

Write: "*This is a very interesting study*".

- Avoid "you" to refer to the reader or people in general.

Don't write: "*You can easily forget how different life was 50 years ago*".

Write: "*It is easy to forget how difficult life was 50 years ago*".

Explicitness

Academic writing is explicit about the relationships in the text.

- It is explicit in its signposting of the organisation of the ideas in the text (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan [7]). As a writer of academic English, it is your responsibility to make it clear to your reader how various parts of the text are related. These connections can be made explicit by the use of different signalling words.

- It is explicit in its acknowledgment of the sources of the ideas in the text.

Write:

McGreil (1977:363-408) has shown that though Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

Don't write:

Although Dubliners find the English more acceptable than the Northern Irish, Dubliners still seek a solution to the Northern problem within an all-Ireland state.

Hedging

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual, simply to convey facts and information. However, it is now recognised that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging" or "vague language". In other words, it is necessary to make decisions about the stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims that are being made. Different subjects prefer to do this in different ways.

Responsibility

In academic writing writers must be responsible for, and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, any claims you make. Writers are also responsible for demonstrating an understanding of any source texts you use.

b) Setting the acceptable writing behaviours

In academic writing, there is a standard that we can refer to as acceptable writing behaviour. Cneansco and Bryd (1989), Horowitz (1986a, b), Johns (1986), Reid (1984, 1985, 1987, 1989), Shih (1986), Strauch (1997), Raimes (1992), Grabe and Kaplan (1996), concur that there is a standard of acceptable writing behaviour. That there is standard is also evident in the various marking rubrics used to assess academic writing at different levels of development (in Peet [8]).

As stated in the marking guidelines used in IGCSE exams, the criterion on assessing academic writing refers to content:

Answering the question

... Does the student make his/her answer interesting using colourful details, personal experiences and/or facts?

Paragraphing

Has the student organised his/her work into paragraphs? Are the paragraphs in the right sequence and accurately linked together so the writing makes a coherent whole?

Subject matter

How well does the student deal with the topic? Does s/he get straight into the topic and seem interested in it, and make the reader interested in it?

Sense of argument

Is the argument set out clearly and logically and does the writer come to a clear conclusion? ... Does the writer give clear examples? Are linking words (e.g. however, moreover, ...) used, and do these help make the meaning clear?

So, in order to best enable the students to achieve desirable results, teachers should train them the habits of applying the above guidelines to each of their piece of writing.

3. Conclusion

In sum, it is not always easy to choose which right level to pitch the language of an

assignment. All academic work should generally be presented in a reasonably formal style, and should not normally use a lot of everyday “street” language. However, this does not mean that it should be excessively stuffy and formal either. Expressing something in a clear, logical and critical way is one of the requirements of good academic writing.

The analysis of the differences between the academic and spoken English together with suitable strategies for teaching academic English are thought to be useful for tertiary English-major students. Once the strategies are applied in parallelism with the learners’ attempt, it is believed that competence of writing academic English among the students can be improved.

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Tiếng Anh học thuật ở bậc đại học: Nét khái quát, tính cấp thiết và một số đề xuất

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Viết tiếng Anh học thuật được xem là kỹ năng quan trọng nhất đối với sinh viên bậc đại học, đặc biệt là đối với sinh viên tiếng Anh. Ở nước ta hiện nay, việc đánh giá năng lực ngôn ngữ của sinh viên chủ yếu dựa vào các hình thức viết: tiểu luận, báo cáo khoa học, các bài thi học phần, và luận văn tốt nghiệp. Tuy nhiên, thực tế cho thấy hầu hết sinh viên tiếng Anh còn gặp nhiều khó khăn trong việc chọn lựa văn phong và ngôn ngữ phù hợp để diễn tả tính khách quan của các bài viết học thuật. Trong phạm vi bài viết này, chúng tôi xin giới thiệu vài nét khái quát về tiếng Anh học thuật, sự cần thiết của việc trang bị cho sinh viên tiếng Anh một số kiến thức về tiếng Anh học thuật, đồng thời đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm giúp sinh viên hoàn thiện khả năng viết tiếng Anh học thuật của mình.