

Academic Writing Pedagogies: Adopting Best Practices for Mastering Research Genres in English

Helán Robert

Abstract

This paper investigates the main approaches to teaching academic writing to university students of English as a foreign language. The investigation takes as its points of departure the text (the end-product of writing), the process (the stages of writing), and practice (the social dimension of writing). Several recommendations are offered for the effective implementation of these approaches in learning to write research genres.

Key words: academic writing, text, process, practice

Introduction

The field of academic writing in the context of English as a foreign language draws on and has been influenced by theories from a range of disciplines such as linguistics, rhetorical studies, composition studies, genre studies, creative writing, and discourse analysis, among others. Each discipline has foregrounded or backgrounded different aspects of academic writing, resulting in “(i)ts complex, multifaceted nature (that) constantly evades adequate description and explanation” (Hyland 2009: 1). However, thanks to different theoretical frameworks, different analytical methods, and different research emphases, educators have at their disposal multiple approaches to teaching academic writing.

Following Hyland’s (2009) classification, three general approaches to teaching academic writing are discussed, each one focusing on a specific facet of writing. Firstly, the end product of writing, i.e. the text, is the foundation on which the pedagogic use of writing templates, specialized corpora, and move analysis are based. Secondly, the writing process is taken as a point of departure to acquaint students with strategies for the different stages of the process of text creation (such as pre-writing, writing, and post-writing). Finally, the social dimension of writing is invoked to better understand the crucial role the audience, or the imagined reader, can play in influencing the style students need to adopt when writing for academic purposes.¹

Textual Approaches

Text-based approaches lend themselves nicely to demonstrating to the students of academic writing important lexico-grammatical and rhetorical features of texts. These textual features can be sufficiently generalized across different genres and disciplines, resulting in models or templates for different language functions common in academic writing such as expressing disagreement with previously

¹ In addition to the above mentioned approaches, Paltridge et al. (2009) also recognize a content-driven approach, genre approach, and critical approach to second language academic writing.

published studies and their authors (see figure 1 below for an example of a template).

The major advantage of templates in the academic writing classroom is that they provide a supporting scaffold to students in the form of patterns for expressing thoughts, leading to clearer and more meaningful writing. Another benefit lies in the generative quality of templates, helping students with generating ideas and thoughts about a specific topic.

Proposition Template 4 (Disagreement)

To hold¹ that X is Y is an example of _____ thinking.

irrational
 muddled
 unfounded
 fuzzy

Examples

To hold that learning a second language is easy is an example of fuzzy thinking.

To hold that life is harder now than it was for our ancestors is an example of muddled thinking.

Figure 1. Disagreement template (taken from King 2007: 20)

As has been discussed above, templates help students with expressing important functions in academic texts. As far as the structure of academic texts is concerned, academic writing instructors can familiarize students with moves, or structural units with a specific purpose. Move analysis was first introduced by Swales (1990), who illustrated these moves on the introduction section of research articles. He proposed a three-move schema for article introductions known as the *Create a Research Space (CARS)* model, with Move 1 – Establishing a territory, Move 2 – Establishing a niche, and Move 3 – Occupying the niche. For an example of the CARS model applied and adapted to the introduction section of medical case reports, see figure 2 below (Helán 2011).

MOVE 1	ESTABLISHING A TERRITORY	<i>The diagnosis of carbon monoxide poisoning is frequently made obvious by the patient's own history; collateral history from attending paramedics or by co-presentation of others who shared a common environment.</i>
MOVE 2	ESTABLISHING A NICHE	<i>However patients with carbon monoxide poisoning who present alone and do not, or cannot, give a history of exposure are acutely dependent upon their physicians' ability to recognise an aggressive multi-system presentation for which carbon monoxide poisoning is the only tenable unifying diagnosis.</i>
MOVE 3	PRESENTING THE PRESENT WORK	<i>We present a case of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning without an early exposure history.</i>

Figure 2. Moves in the introduction section of medical case reports ²

² Medical case report taken from: <http://www.jmedicalcasereports.com/content/2/1/118> (retrieved in 2012)

There is a range of useful activities based on the Swalesian three-move structure. Students can be assigned to look for this structure in articles which they find important in their field. By analyzing model academic articles of their choice, they can begin to understand the implicit rules of effective writing, which are valid across different disciplines. Interesting discussions can ensue in case the texts digress from the expected structure or they exhibit disciplinary differences such as in social as opposed to natural sciences. In addition, students are encouraged to include moves in their texts that they would not otherwise think of by themselves, thus enhancing the effectiveness of their writing.

Using specialized corpora built with a specific aim in mind, such as to increase the chance of being accepted to a conference, is another textual approach students find particularly useful. By building small corpora of specific texts (such as academic articles from a certain journal and on a certain topic), students can immediately see the conventions of language use in context. With the help of various text analysis tools such as *TextSTAT* (text statistics)³ or *Adtat* (Adelaide text analysis tool)⁴, they can search the corpora, which are extremely helpful in clarifying the usage and terminology in a specific discipline, journal, genre, or part-genre (e.g., introductions of research articles). In addition, fine-tuned lexico-grammatical norms can be revealed, such as the use of definite, indefinite, and zero articles (see figure 3 below for the usage of the word *present* in medical case reports, using *TextSTAT*).

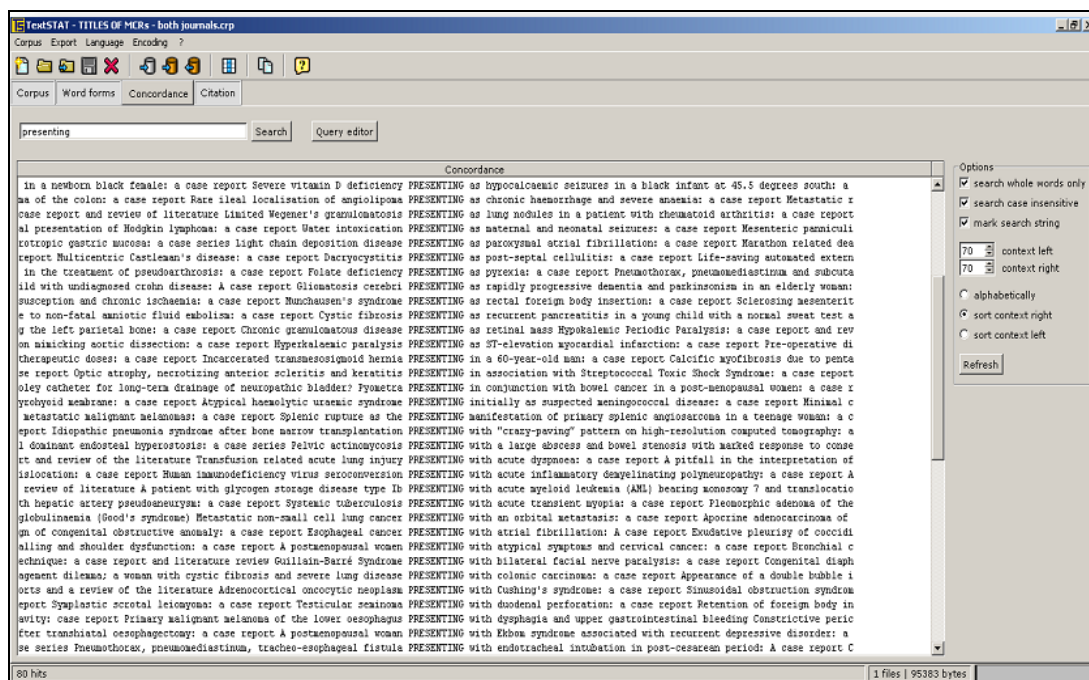


Figure 3. Concordances with co-text for the verb *present* as displayed in TextSTAT

Process-Based Approaches

While textual approaches have been developed around the end-product of writing, i.e. the text, process-based approaches deal with strategies for the individual

³ <http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/en/textstat/> (retrieved in 2012)

⁴ <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/red/adttat/> (retrieved in 2012)

stages of the writing process, i.e. the initial pre-writing stage, the middle stage of writing down the thoughts, and the final post-writing stage. Shulman's *POWER* writing process (see figure 4 below), standing for *prepare, outline, write, edit, and rewrite* (cited in Paltridge et al 2009: 68), aptly summarizes the specific steps inherent in the three stages. To make their writing more manageable and less intimidating, students should be working on one step at a time. As the process tends to be recursive and exploratory rather than linear and straightforward, it is important for the students to become aware of this non-linearity and complexity and adapt their writing accordingly.

THE POWER WRITING PROCESS (Shulman 2005)				
<u>PREPARE</u>	<u>OUTLINE</u>	<u>WRITE</u>	<u>EDIT</u>	<u>REWRITE</u>
Purpose	Thesis	Content	Clarity	Accuracy
Audience	Major points	Organization	Coherence	Readability
Goal	Minor points	Style	Conciseness	
	Supporting data		Precision	

Figure 4. The stages and steps of the *POWER* writing process

Multiple strategies have been developed for each stage of the writing process, drawing on creative writing and expressivist view of writing. The use of specific techniques from the field of creative writing can contribute enormously to students' development of writing abilities. It is claimed (e.g., Pazderníková 2009) that fantasy and imagination play a crucial role in scientific disciplines. While scientific work is based on convergent thinking of the left hemisphere, creative work comes from the right hemisphere, involving divergent thinking. Both types of thinking can complement each other in the process of composing academic texts.

For the pre-writing stage of the writing process, a technique called *free writing* (Elbow 1973) or *automatic text* (Pazderníková 2009) can be used to prepare students for the writing they need to do. The technique is based on the notion that writing is a complex process requiring a strict separation of the composing stage from the revising stage. Attempting to manage both at the same time can lead to slow progress in writing or even a failure to stay motivated and keep writing. The idea behind the concept of *free writing* is to become accustomed to daily writing and form a habit of it. An alternative to *free writing* may include focused *free writing*, in which the writing is restricted to a specific topic, helping students generate ideas about it. The following is an extract of a free writing carried out as a possible warm-up activity in an academic writing lesson (taken from Elbow 1973: 1-7):

"I think I'll write what's on my mind, but the only thing on my mind right now is what to write for ten minutes. I've never done this before and I'm not prepared in any way--the sky is cloudy, how's that? now (*sic*) I'm afraid I won't be able to think of what to write when I get to the end of the sentence--well, here I am at the end of the sentence--here I am again, again, again, again, at least I'm still writing..."

Another activity helping students brainstorm ideas about a specific topic has been referred to as *clustering* (Pazderníková 2009). *Clustering* is a strategy that allows students to organize their ideas, making connections between different perspectives and views. It is particularly useful when dealing with complex, multi-faceted topics that cannot easily be organized into lists. See figure 5 for an example of this technique.

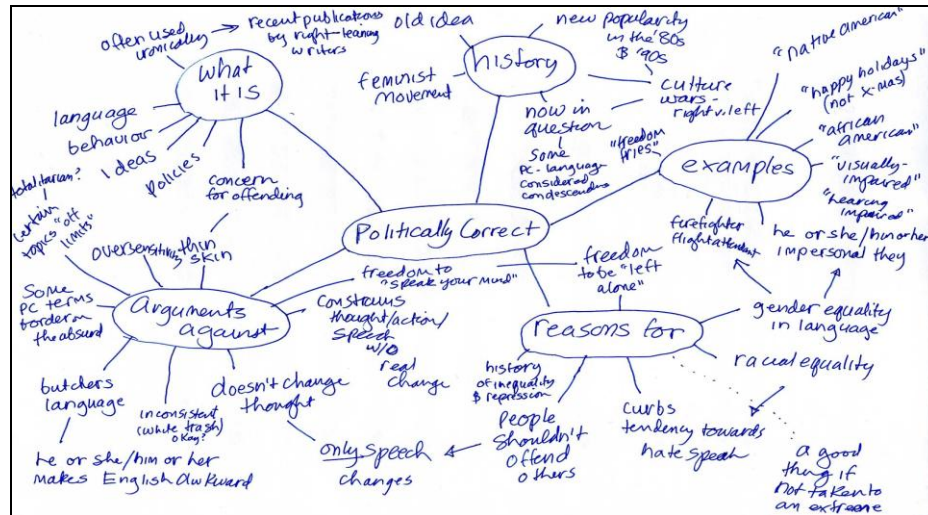


Figure 5. *Clustering* activity for the topic of being politically correct⁵

In learning to write, students should not only be taught about the lexicogrammar, style, and structure of a specific genre, but they should also be encouraged to think about and reflect on their own writing process in terms of what works for them and what does not. A suitable activity which explores students' ways of writing is based on drawing or sketching the writing process they go through in composing texts. Academic writing instructors can demonstrate the activity by showing the students the sketches of their own writing process.

Many other activities and strategies adapted from the field of creative writing can be used for the development of the specific stages of the writing process – for a detailed description, see Pazderníková (2009). Some of the examples include: for and against (listing arguments for and against choosing a specific topic for researching), a letter written to one's academic text, and an acrostic (i.e., a type of writing in which the first letter of each line in the text forms a word or a message – see below figure 6 – translated from Pazderníková *ibid*: 121).

Reality in novels is an ambiguous notion
Even a bit vague
And still I have decided to use it
Lacking a better way of expression
Imagination is also a bit confusing word
Therefore I'll have to look in a dictionary
Yearning for some clarification of the notions

Figure 6. An acrostic for the key word *reality*

⁵ Taken from http://english405idi.blogspot.cz/2012_11_01_archive.html (retrieved in 2013)

Social-Practice Approaches

While textual approaches are concerned with the immediate co-text (the textual environment preceding and following a particular word, sentence, or paragraph) and process approaches with the composing situation, social-practice approaches are oriented towards “the purposes, goals and uses that the completed text may eventually fulfill” (Hyland 2009: 29). In other words, social-practice approaches take into account the potential reader or audience.

What has additionally been stressed in social-practice approaches is that academic writing should be viewed as a communal activity. As Harris states: “We write (...) as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of communities to which we belong” (1989: 12). What academics write is thus circumscribed, both in form and content, by tacit rules and rhetorical conventions of disciplinary discourse communities. Adherence to these implicit norms enables authors to gain access to, win acceptance by and maintain membership of their respective discourse communities.

The notion of discourse community was coined by Swales (1990), who regards it as crucial for the understanding of the factors impacting on the way academics compose their texts. He proposes several defining features of discourse communities relating to their common goals, participatory mechanisms, exchange of information, specific genres, specialized terminology, and level of expertise. However, the notion has come under criticism for neglecting the dynamic nature of discourse communities. Furthermore, the notion appears to be somewhat restrictive and definitive although such communities are often heterogeneous and diverse, with different degrees of participation of their members (such as expert versus novices)⁶.

Classroom application of the notion of discourse community can consist in emphasizing the social dimension of writing. This can be done by teaching students to anticipate the potential interests, understandings, and needs of the audience (i.e., the discourse community) to whom they are writing. To become a member of a discourse community, students should be in contact with the academic world. They should have knowledge of the topics and issues deemed important and current in their disciplines. They should develop the skill to use conventionalized language acceptable in their respective disciplines. Least but not last, they should take on the role (and identity) of a researcher, displaying disciplinary knowledge in terms of current theories and methods, rhetorical and linguistic conventions, and established and successful practices.

One way of scaffolding students' initiation into their respective discourse communities is to encourage them to take on the role of an experienced, authoritative writer. This can be done using an activity called syntactic borrowing or skeleton writing (Kamler and Thomson 2006). The activity may be useful to novice doctoral students who can benefit from undertaking identity work in terms of language typical for expert or seasoned academics in their disciplines. The activity is based on imitating established language models such as common formulas, typical rhetorical moves, and balanced modesty versus self-assurance. The activity (adapted from Kamler and Thomson *ibid.*) consists of three stages: (1) students identify and underline important rhetorical patterns in authoritative texts from their

⁶ Various other notions concerning the communal perspective on writing have been introduced such as speech community, interpretive community, and community of practice.

disciplines, (2) they add synonymous expressions to some of the underlined words to avoid word-for-word copying, and (3) they write a paragraph using the skeleton and synonyms. See figure 7 for a demonstration of the activity.

I. Identifying and underlining important rhetorical patterns
The study builds on and contributes to work in critical linguistics (Coulthard, 1996; Chilton, 1982; Fairclough, 1989; Seidel, 1985; Van Dijk, 1989, 1991; Wodak, 1989). Although studies in critical linguistics have examined the discursive construction of past events, there has not been an extended study of the construction of a projected event. As such, this study provides additional insight into the constructive processes of language by explicating the linguistic and rhetorical processes through which a projected—future—event is constructed as a discrete and autonomous state of affairs.

II. Adding synonymous expressions to some of the underlined words
 The study builds on and contributes to work in _____.

work research paper report survey article	draws on is based on expands extends	adds to makes a contribution to refers to is connected with is linked with is related to
----------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Although studies in _____ have examined _____,
 there has not been a/an _____.

investigated, compared, concerned, demonstrated,
 dealt with, focused on, looked at, indicated, revealed,
 found, reported, shown, suggested...

As such, this study provides additional insight into _____.

understanding of, perspective on, viewpoint on,
 position on, standpoint on

III. Using the skeleton and synonyms to write a paragraph
 (sample answer – the used skeleton and synonyms are underlined)
The paper is based on and makes a contribution to the research in genre analysis (Swales 2002, Hyland 2008). Although studies in genre analysis have dealt with medical discourse, there has not been a detailed study carried out on the genre of medical case reports. As such, this study provides an additional perspective into the language medical professional use in writing clinical reports of patients' cases.

Figure 7. Demonstration of skeleton writing (taken from Helán 2012)

Conclusion

This paper described the main academic writing pedagogies, or better referred to as approaches to teaching academic writing, namely the textual, process, and social-practice approaches. Each approach was demonstrated by specific activities regarded as exemplary instances of best practices. Firstly, the textual approaches were viewed as sources of models of conventionalized lexico-grammar and rhetoric, the former being exemplified via templates and the latter by structural move analysis. In addition, the usefulness of building corpora of specialized academic texts and the effectiveness of using text analysis tools were discussed. Secondly, process-based approaches were outlined, drawing on creative writing and expressivist view of writing. Activities such as free writing, clustering, and creating an acrostic were

debated, helping students generate ideas for writing. Finally, the social-practice approach was described, emphasizing the communal perspective on academic writing, with an exemplification of skeleton writing – an activity focusing on student identity work as a researcher. All three approaches contribute to the development of students' academic writing abilities in English as a foreign language.

References

- ELBOW, P. *Writing Without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, 209 p. ISBN 0-19-512016-7.
- HARRIS, J. The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing. In: *College Composition and Communication*. 1989, vol. 40 (1), p. 11 – 22.
- HELÁN, R. Disciplinary Writing for Publication in English: Empowering and Equipping EFL Doctoral Students with Writing Skills and Tools. In: Kaščáková, E., and K. Mihoková. *FORLANG: Cudzie jazyky v akademickom prostredí. Periodický zborník vedeckých príspevkov vydaný pri príležitosti 60. výročia založenia Technickej univerzity v Košiciach a Katedry jazykov*. Košice: Technická univerzita v Košiciach, 2012, p. 39-47. ISBN 978-80-553-0982-8.
- HELÁN, R. Helping Medical Students Write: Genre Analysis of Medical Case Reports. In: Kaščáková, E., and M. Zvirinský. *FORLANG Cudzie jazyky v akademickom prostredí*. Košice: Technická univerzita v Košiciach, 2011, p. 75-85. ISBN 978-80-553-0743-5.
- HYLAND, K. *Teaching and Researching Writing*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2009, 263 p. ISBN 978-1-4082-0505-1.
- KAMLER, B., P. THOMSON. *Helping Doctoral Students Write. Pedagogies for Supervision*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006, 173 p. ISBN 978-0-203-96981-6.
- KING, K. B. *Writing Template Book. The MICHIGAN Guide to Writing Well and Success on High-Stakes Tests*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007, 97 p. ISBN 978-0-472-03193-1.
- PALTRIDGE, B. et al. *Teaching Academic Writing. An Introduction for Teachers of Second Language Writers*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009, 187 p. ISBN 978-0-472-03334-8.
- PAZDERNÍKOVÁ, P. *Tvůrčí psaní a vědecká práce. Využití tvůrčích technik při přípravě, psaní a prezentaci odborného textu. Dizertační práce. (Creative Writing and Scientific Work. The Use of Creative Techniques for Preparation, Writing and Presentation of Scientific Text. Dissertation.)* Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2009, 328 p.
- SWALES, J. M. *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 260 p. ISBN 978-0-521-33813-4.

Contact: Mgr. Robert Helán, Ph.D.

Masarykova univerzita, Centrum jazykového vzdělávání na Lékařské fakultě,
Kamenice 5, 625 00 Brno, Česká republika

E-mail: rhelan@med.muni.cz