Chapter 1: General introduction

1.1. Introduction

Disciplinary academic writing is not generally an entrenched tradition in many English second language (ESL) educational institutions in the 'Outer Circle' (Kachru 1992). Yet competence in academic English remains a key requirement for access to the prestigious world of academic publications and successful grant proposals in an increasingly competitive and globalized higher education context. It is too often the case that manuscripts, submitted by ESL writers (from the 'periphery') to high profile English-medium journals in the Anglophone 'centre', are recommended for extensive reviews (for feedback on L2 manuscripts from journals editors, see e.g. Gosden 1992; Connor & Mayberry 1996; Ventola 1996; Flowerdew 2001; Burrough-Boenish 2003a, 2003b) partly because these submissions fail to respect certain requirements of academic English, which among other things require that data should be presented, analyzed and interpreted using certain language conventions generally referred to as the "rhetoric of academic reporting". Evidently, the challenges of writing for publication are daunting to all scholars; but these are compounded in most ESL situations because academics there are often isolated from relevant literature, and consequently unable to situate their work in a current rhetorical tradition. International journals most often demand writing that is not too direct to run the risk of being considered as brusque or dogmatic, and at the same time not too tentative to be judged as equivocal, diffident or naïve (Sötter 1988; Connor 1996). Achieving academic writing proficiency that avoids these extremes is surely a delicate balancing act for most students and researchers in Cameroon (my experience). The subject of academic writing continues to be a challenging one for this community of scholars (cf. Nkemleke 2008a, 2010), and a largely unfamiliar topic for practicing teachers.

This book aims to raise awareness on this topic by highlighting some of the theoretical and practical issues involved in writing academic English. The book has largely been motivated by the fact that EAP (English for Academic Purposes) is still very much undefined in Cameroon, and writing courses across universities are usually only focused on usage problems in grammar (use of tense, aspect etc.), vocabulary (use of formal/informal words), punctuation and mechanics (use of commas, semi-colons, brackets, italics etc.). In some cases research students at the Masters/PhD level may have the opportunity to take short courses on mechanical aspects of dissertation writing such as referencing and formatting. However, most of this training is often limited to student-advisor level. As far as I can remember, until recently in most Cameroonian universities, there were no full-time courses on academic writing in the sense covered in this book: for

academic English goes beyond mere study skills and learning to produce error-free texts with good punctuations.

Within a rapidly growing context of competitive knowledge production and dissemination, Fairclough (1993) and Swales (2004) have made reference to the fact that written genres in higher education will have to be increasingly "commodified" and "marketized". What this means is that the content of academic papers will have to be sufficiently innovative and the channel of delivery of such content (i.e. meta-language) will have to be persuasive and attuned to the practices of the science community, for it to "sell". These market-oriented metaphors highlight the value of this introductory book in the context of social communication in general, and the practices of academic discourse in Cameroon, in particular. Like all genres, academic English has its own generic conventions (Bhatia 1997) and membership in that community necessitates an understanding and demonstration of ownership of those conventions. It is therefore desirable that university level academics should familiarize themselves with aspects of academic writing practices. These aspects are examined under six broad headings in this book on the basis of their frequency of occurrence in a database of over one million words of written texts. They include (1) hedging (e.g. use of *may appear*, *it seems, suggest*), (2) lexical bundles (e.g. use of recurrent phrases such as *the purpose of*, *in relation to the*, *is due to the*), (3) metadiscourse (e.g. use of *therefore*, *however*, *on the other hand*), (4) textual variation (e.g. use of a wide range of lexical choices, including nominalizations, subordination and passive constructions), (5) evaluation (e.g. use of adjectives, verbs and adverbs to convey personal judgement and attitude) and (6) modality (e.g. use of *may*, *could*, *should*). Hedging and modality overlap, especially at the level of assessment of propositions. The different chapters dedicated to them will cover other aspects of dissimilarity between them.

1.2. Defining academic writing

Academic writing is not easy to define. Consequently, most literature on the topic does not usually provide a clear idea of what it is; preferring to focus on general characteristics of formal writing. Simply stated, academic writing is writing done by students and researchers/scholars in an academic environment such as the university. Such writing should enable students to acquire and understand knowledge; and manipulate such knowledge in appropriate styles and conventions in the discipline (Bailey & Heritage 2008; Chamot & O'Malley 1994; Schleppegrell 2004). Reference to appropriate styles and conventions in the discipline here is indicative of the "special" character of academic writing. This type of writing is one that takes place within social institutions beyond the ordinary school setting. To use Gee's (1998) terminology, it can be characterized as "secondary discourse"; one that builds on, and extends the use of language we acquire as part of our "primary discourse" in our homes, with peers and in informal situations. In other words, academic English and/or literacy is the ability to "use" and "function" in a language in secondary discourse situations, and to

critique the primary discourse or other secondary discourses. We can conceptualize many degrees of secondary uses of language within a specific academic area, as well as variations across different academic fields. It is evident that writing of this nature is a skill that has to be acquired through practice.

Since academic literacy is a skill that has to be acquired, it is developmental with trajectories of increased sophistication in language use from one level to another. Consequently, academic English writers or practitioners can be seen to be in a continuum that includes native and non-native speakers. Within this range we can still identify different proficiency levels with respect to whether or not individuals practice academic writing as a profession. Given this complexity, therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of academic writing has been characterized as an evolving one by some EAP researchers who tend to have various thoughts of what it is, and how it should be instantiated in language. A number of ideas have been put forth to try to clarify the whole construct of the term at different linguistic levels; from lexical to discoursal (e.g. Bailey & Butler 2002/3; Schleppegrell 2001), as well as at various dimensions; from cognitive to socio-cultural (e.g. Scarcella 2003) and corpus-based (e.g. Schmied 2011).

Irrespective of the orientation, there is a general consensus that a working definition of academic English should begin by recognition of the following essential characteristics: clarity, conciseness, focused, and appropriateness of style. These entry points' features are recapitulated and expanded in the following checklist (Table 1.1) of a New PhD Course on Academic Writing in English in Oslo/Norway (http://www.lysebu.no/Eng/), accessed May 2008. They are complemented by a checklist (Table 1.2) adapted from *When Writers Write*, Prentice-Hall, 1982 prepared for the LRC (Language Research Centre) by Kathy MacDonald.

task	purpose
editing for clarity and precision	to acquire the skills for writing so clearly that the reader cannot possibly misinterpret the intended meaning
solving reference problems	to learn to eliminate ambiguity in writing
solving modifier problems	to learn to present information accurately
using parallel structure	to learn to present parallel information in a form that the reader can easily grasp
editing for power (i.e. keeping the reader's attention)	to learn to say more with fewer words, so that the reader's attention is focused on the intended subject
editing for logic	to learn how to choose words and language structures that strengthen argument
writing and editing for appropriate tone	to learn to use words, sentence structure, and overall organization to impress or influence the reader in a particular way
eliminating deadwood	to learn to edit for brevity, clarity, and cohesion
outlining	to learn and develop techniques for organizing data logically and usefully
focussing information	to learn to eliminate philosophically interesting digressions that distract the reader's attention from the subject
working with the "psychology of reading"	to learn how to write for an English-speaking audience by understanding how English speakers read

Table 1.1: Checklist of academic writing tips, Oslo/Norway, 2008

> ✓ Is your thesis clearly stated near the beginning of the paper? (Thesis = main idea)
> ✓ Is your thesis narrow enough to be proved in a paper of this length?
> ✓ Is your thesis reasonably interesting or original?
> ✓ Have you included enough evidence or proof to persuade someone who disagrees with you?
> ✓ Have you chosen your evidence or proof carefully and explained how it proves your point?
> ✓ Have you anticipated and answered intelligent questions and objections to your idea?
> ✓ Have you avoided mere summary? (Unless your instructor has specifically asked for a summary)
> ✓ Have you used quotations with care? (Too many quotations seem like padding. Too few may give the impression you have done no reading on the subject.)
> ✓ Are your paraphrases really your own words and style of writing? (Do they sound like the rest of your paper?)
> ✓ Is your paper logical? Have you eliminated oversimplifications and contradictions?
> ✓ Is your sentence style straightforward and concise? (No wordiness or gobbledygook.)
> ✓ If appropriate have you given enough documentation and page references?
> ✓ Is your grammar basically correct? Have you proofread the final copy?

Table 1.2: Checklist of academic writing tips, Prince-Hall, 1982

The following responses (Table 1.3) to Gosden's (1992) survey of 154 editors' assessment (in the US, Canada and UK) of the publishability of L2 manuscripts reinforce elements of the two previous tables, and add other dimensions of what academic writing is perceived to be.

1	logical clear linking of sentences for the reader
2	development of the topic from sentence to sentence in a coherent way
3	use of grammatically correct sentences
4	ability to manipulate skillfully the language used in making [...] claim
5	appreciation of the level of claim that can justifiably be made for [the] research
6	organization of the different sections of the paper in a clear and logical way
7	appreciation of the status of their work in the wider academic community
8	ability to manipulate the language which reflects awareness of this status
9	writing in a style of academic written English and not every day spoken English
10	use of a wide range of vocabulary

Table 1.3: Ranking of editor's perception on the publishability of L2 research articles

Furthermore, text studies (e.g. Bazerman & Paradis 1991; Biber 1998) have also identified the following as characteristics of academic English: use of complex sentences, frequent use of passives, nominalizations, noun clusters and stacked modifiers.

Clearly, academic writing is far from being a clear-cut concept; but this in no way implies that it is vague writing. Based on the criteria above, a well-written academic text may easily be distinguished from an oral transcript, for example. Indeed, writing in the academia goes further than polishing style and observing basic syntactic rules. It involves not only presenting clear claims, reasons, and evidence, as most aspects in the tables above suggest, but doing so in the context of arguments that have been or might be made in reply. Furthermore, to a large extent academic English is also disciplinary specific. Linguists do not write like microbiologists and aviation texts are rhetorically different from historical texts, although they all obey basic rules of clarity, logic and grammaticality. These basic features have been considered the most essential by many EAP writers (Hutchinson & Waters 1987; Blue 1988; Spack 1988), who have argued against subject-specific teaching of academic English, on grounds that our emphasis should be on learners and learning rather than on target texts and practices. Nevertheless, the specificity of academic writing is self-evident to the extent that academic disciplines are different and have different conventions. The whole idea of "specificity" was central to the original conception of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), when it was characterized as centred on the language, and activities appropriate to particular disciplines and occupations (Halliday et al. 1964). In fact, much of the impetus for considering academic writing as disciplinary-specific has come from educators and researchers in the disciplines, who have realized the critical role language plays in acquiring content knowledge and writing about that content. It is this subject-specific orientation of academic writing that constitutes the focus of this book.

In attempting, therefore, to identify those lexico-grammatical and discoursal functions that should constitute the centrepiece of academic English, research on EAP has tended to focus on a "thicker" description of language use in academia (Hyland 2006). Within the specific discipline of social sciences, especially general and applied linguistics, features such as modality (Ventola 1997; Vihla 1999; Nkemleke 2008a), hedging (Hyland 1995; 1998a; Wills 1997), metadiscourse (Martin & Rose 2003; Dafouz 2003; Ifantidou 2005), recurrent multi-word expressions (Biber et al. 1999; Hyland 2004) and stance/evaluation (Thetela 1997; Conrad & Biber 2000; Silver 2003) have been identified as markers of proficient language use (Bamberg 1983; McCulley 1985) in academic writing. A strong theoretical claim which seems to have justified this type of inquiry is a widely-held view, supported by empirical evidence, that text types exhibit regular linguistic patterns (Biber 1988). The view of academic writing taken in this study, therefore, goes beyond general characteristics, and rather focuses on disciplinary-specific rhetorical resources such as hedging, modality, multi-word expressions, metadiscourse and nominalization, critically required to present persuasive arguments, report tentative results and build abstraction in an academic written communication.

1.2.1. Academic writing as community practice

In a general sense, language is always used within a community – be it a community bound by socio-political ties, or by the practice of common academic disciplines and non-academic professional groups. However, because writing in the university is writing that strives among other things to high standards of verification and sound reason, persuasion and manipulation of audience expectations and biases (Bizzell 1994), academic English has become increasingly conventionalized, developing its own specific ways of "doing" and "saying" things. Hyland (2009:46) has observed that 'successful academic writing depends in part on the individual's projection of a shared professional context'. Clarification of what that shared context is provides a basis for a framework on which to conceptualize the expectations, conventions and practices which influence academic communication. The concept of an academic community is based on a number of theoretical assumptions ranging from sociolinguistics (Hymes 1974) to the sociology of science (Kuhn 1970; Rorty 1979; Brufee 1986) and social constructivism (Vygotsky 1962; Wright 1996; Wenger 1998; Kukla 2000). It is similar to Thomas Kuhn's (1970) concept of "paradigm" – a comprehensive theoretical model that governs both the view of reality accepted by an intellectual community and the practices of that community's discipline. According to Kuhn, a scientific community cannot practice its trade without some set of received beliefs. These beliefs form the foundation of the educational initiation that prepares and licenses the student for professional practice.

Whether we study language on the basis of context of use, involving constituted groups defined along professional lines or social ranks (sociolinguistics), or whether we emphasize how meaning and understanding grow out of social encounters (constructivism), or simply analyze the anatomy of propositions of speakers in a particular domain (sociology of science), the idea of 'community' is implied. The resources of language are fairly static (i.e. its grammar and lexis), but how individuals and groups draw from these resources to construct meaning depends on a whole range of parameters: from formality to informality, educated to less educated, written to spoken etc. It follows from this premise that as members of defined groups engage with one another in using language, particular ways of "saying" and "doing" will emerge and become entrenched. These will then gradually come to be accepted as the norm of common practice and of recognition of membership to the group. In other words, we have to 'learn how to mean' (Halliday 1975) in the discipline. Thus, '[by] engaging with others we enter into a community of shared belief or value concerning what is interesting or worth discussing and through our language choices we align ourselves with, challenge, or extend what has been said before' (Hyland 2009:4).

The beliefs and values of this community of interest are then instantiated in language use through a tacit acceptance of shared conventions or rhetorical

choices, design, and delivery. Such community conventions exemplified in language use defines the group's identity and is propagated through group solidarity and influence until it becomes a stable index of the practice of the group. To quote Hyland again, 'community conventions are therefore also a means of fostering group mythologies, solidarity and social control, helping to ring-fence communities by identifying their users as insiders and excluding others' (2009:48).

As with any social group, there are rules and regulations setting limits on what can be said and how it should be said for it to be accepted and validated as reliable and quotable knowledge in an academic community. The former may refer to current issues at stake such as cutting-edge technologies or debates and controversies in the discipline. The latter, which is the focus of this book, relates essentially to "packaging" and "delivery". This relates to the types of linguistic features that should be employed to make a convincing argument; one that will neither be seen as superfluous (Grice's Maxims, see Grice 1975) nor presumptuous (Politeness Principle, see Leech 1983), for example. In other words, in making statements on an issue on which insufficient evidence is available, the writer may want to be tentative, or in an attempt to persuade the doubting reader to accept his/her point of view, the writer may want to make use of engagement and dialogic strategies that English possesses (cf. Bakhtin 1986). Dialogism is an important point here because it has the effect of minimizing Face-Threatening-Acts (Brown & Levinson 1987), a socio-psychological animosity that every act of relational discourse usually provokes in the opposite direction. In a sense, it is the vital self-accommodating strategy which can be used to associate the reader in on-going discourse, thereby soliciting his/her acceptance.

The implications of all these theoretical underpinnings on writing practices in an academic setting are two-fold. First, written academic language should be seen to show politeness through acknowledging the limit of one's proposition against all other "truths", which may be unknown. Second, written academic language should be seen to drag the reader along, persuading him/her as it were, to accept the point of view being expressed. In accomplishing these tasks, academic writers have to learn to use the rhetorical conventions and stylistic practices that are tacit and routine for the members (Doheny-Farina 1992).

The preceding discussion does not necessarily imply homogeneity of academic language in all disciplines. While certain common core features such as those outlined in the preceding section may cut across all forms of formal writing, disciplinary specificities do exit. It is on this basis that Becher & Trowler (2001) talk of academic tribes and Swales (2004) refers to constellations of genres or genre colonies. Some scholars have even suggested that different disciplines tend to represent reality in different ways, using different lexical, grammatical and rhetorical resources. For example, while the natural sciences represent experience through technicality by establishing a range of technical terms which are ordered to explain how things exist (Wignell 1998, 2007;

Wignell et al. 1993), Hyland (2009:8) states that the humanities, like history and philosophy, employ abstraction, a metaphorical construal of experience into processes.

An illustration of the difference between technical and abstract language is in order here: The first example (a), which demonstrates abstraction, is taken from Downing (1991:110-111) and the second (b), which illustrates technicality, is quoted in Hyland (2009:7-8).

(a) i- We walk in the evening along the river to Henley.
     ii- Our evening walk along the river took us to Henley.

(b) iii- Osmotic tolerance – the ability of an organism to in media with widely varying osmolarities – is accomplished in bacteria with an adjustment of the internal osmolarity so that it always exceeds that of the medium. Intracellular accumulation of potassium ions (K+) seems to play a major role in this adjustment.

In the first example both clauses (i and ii) describe a similar experience – that of walking from one spot to another. However, the process (verbal) constituent in the second clause has been realized in an incongruent manner, turning it into a nominal phrase. The first clause is realized in a congruent fashion ("say it the way it is"). The science text in the second example is more technically worded than the previous ones.

1.2.2. Levels of academic communities within EAP

At least three levels of communities can be distinguished within the wide field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Schmied 2011:2f):

- Student English (student EAP): The academic 'novice' may come from an "Anglophone" background where English is used for a variety of intra-national functions including teaching at secondary schools. Still academic writing requires additional training, for it necessitates the independent search for appropriate information, its critical evaluation and media-specific presentation. The traditional genre at this level is the academic essay of 2,000 to 5,000 words (occasionally also a corresponding media-supported oral presentation).
- (International) Research English (research EAP): Although the written exchange of research results has a long tradition (in Britain at least since the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in the 17th century), the importance of international scholarly articles has increased enormously over the last decades, partly due to the increasing competition among universities and researchers and partly due to the new electronic media. This led to the standardization of peer-review procedures and the corresponding discussion of subject- and genre-specific conventions.

In contrast to student EAP, the latter two categories, doctoral and research EAP, are more specialized in the sense that they (have to) follow more subject-specific conventions. This applies to individual research journals, as well as whole research communities, e.g. in literary or social science academic cultures, like the MLA and the ASA/APA, respectively). Such conventions – together with the specialized terminology and argumentation procedures – have made research EAP increasingly an in-group phenomenon. To balance this trend, a new EAP category has gained more and more importance: non-specialised writing for a general academic readership, which can be called Popular Academic English (popular EAP). This has political implications, since societies demand increasingly to be informed about public investment in universities and (other) research institutions.

In this book, essays/dissertations (students' EAP) and abstracts (research EAP) are analyzed in the context of ESL writing. As already mentioned, academic writing is different from ordinary writing and a new skill that has to be learned. Consequently, students and researchers who are still trying to define their own identities and secure themselves a place in the local academic community of their disciplines, often use academic language in certain distinctive ways. In this process of adaptation to a new mind set, Cameroonian students and researchers who have studied English within a multi-linguistic background of many languages often produce texts with unique characteristics (Nkemleke 2006a, 2006b).

Previous studies on academic writing in ESL settings can be put into three broad categories:

- First, the cultural approach, which argues that cultural expectations associated with academic English, may be at odds with the expectations based on students' L1 cultures (see Y. Kachru 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1995; Taylor & Cohen 1991; Bloch & Chi 1995; Bickner & Peyasantiwong 1988; Nkemleke 2006b). These studies, especially the one by Y. Kachru, have advocated a reassessment of the methodologies of Contrastive Rhetoric; calling for an inclusive methodological orientation that should aim at producing typologies of academic styles based on institutionalized varieties of English in the ESL communities.
- Second, the developmental approach (e.g. Hinkel 2004, Ivanic 1998; Geisler 1994; Bizzell 1994), which focuses on the development of academic writing skills and the issue of whether students are adequately introduced to the expectations of their (and the international) academic community.
- Third, the pragmatic/functional approach, which highlights the ways interpersonal meanings are expressed and described using such linguistic resources as "evaluation" (Hunston & Thompson 2000), "appraisal" (Martin 2000; Martin & White 2005), "stance" (Biber & Finegan 1989; Hyland 1999) as well as markers of metadiscourse (Crismore 1989;

Crismore et al. 1993; Hyland 2004, 2005a) and other patterns of engagements (see Hyland 2005a; Coffin & Hewings 2005).

As already indicated, my investigation follows this third tradition and analyzes features of students' essays, end-of-course dissertations, and conference abstracts from a quantitative and qualitative basis.

1.3. Methodology

1.3.1. The corpus

Data for this book is taken from a number of sources (Table 1.4): firstly, the students' essay component of the Corpus of Cameroon English (compiled 1992-1994 cf. Nkemleke 2008b); secondly, essays subsequently collected during the 2006, 2008 and 2009 academic years from students of the Department of English of the Higher Teacher Training College; thirdly, end-of-course postgraduate dissertations in English and literary studies for 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 academic years in the same department. The fourth category of texts contains abstracts of two international conferences which were held in Yaounde in 2005 and 2006 (see Appendices for details of each category).

text category	year	no. of texts	no. of words
end-of-course dissertations	2005-2009	156	1,032,380
students' essays	1992-1994 & 2006, 2008, 2009	210	254,549
conference abstracts	2005-2006	130	30,405
total			1,317,334

Table 1.4: Composition of data

End-of-course dissertations: The end-of-course dissertations (equivalent to Masters level work) were written by students of the Department of English of the Higher Teacher Training College as part of the requirement for graduation. These students were from four of the five state universities in Cameroon, and they were admitted into the school after taking a competitive entrance examination. The dissertation topics range from general linguistics and applied linguistics to an exploration of regional literatures: African, American, English, and Commonwealth. The average length of a dissertation is 25,000 to 30,000 words, consisting of three main sections: introduction, theory/literature review and analysis/conclusion. In the introductory chapters, candidates articulate the research problem and state the methodology. In the theory and literature survey sections, they basically write about the theory or theories they intend to use, and review literature, if available. The analysis and conclusion section is where the students actually engage in personal writing and argumentation. My experience is that the theory and/or literature review section is generally not the work of the

students. At this level, most of them simply copy or adapt existing texts. For this reason, these sections were excluded from the database. Dedications, acknowledgements, and appendices were also excluded from the count. The dissertation process generally takes four semesters at the Higher Teacher Training College. When students come into the school in the first year, they choose a dissertation advisor, who generally works with them to choose a topic, or approves the one they may already have. The students then go ahead to present a plan of work which the two agree upon. The writing process generally begins after this, and it is completed in the second year. Before the dissertation is approved for a public defence, the advisor must write a pre-defence report (Chapter 6) in which he/she acknowledges having supervised the work, identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the study, confirms that the dissertation meets basic academic standards, as far as the conduct of research and academic writing is concerned, and suggests a jury.

Students' essays: The average length of each essay included in this corpus is about 1,000 words. Two sets of essays are involved here. The first set is the essay component of the corpus of Cameroon English that were written between 1990 and 1994 by students of the department of English of the University of Yaounde (cf. Nkemleke 2008a). The second set (about 75 per cent) contains long essays that I collected from students at the end of the Academic Writing course I taught at the Higher Teacher Training College over the course of 4 years. It should be noted that most of the students pursuing a professional teaching Diploma in this school are MA and PhD students in university faculties across the country. Some of them are also practicing teachers who graduated from the first cycle of the school, taught English and literature for many years in secondary and high school, and came back for further training in the second cycle. The Academic Writing course usually consists of two main components. First, we discuss theoretical literature on topics such as modality, metadiscourse, hedging, coherence and cohesion and second, we engage in hands-on text analyses using publications from peer-reviewed journals and book chapters dealing with the issues mentioned above. Part of the reason for doing this has been to encourage students to read the literature on academic English by exposing them to the kind of writing that is practiced in academic publications, in the hope that they learn to model their writing after those examples. After these exercises, they are then asked to submit lengthy essays to obtain a continuous assessment mark, which qualifies them to take an examination in that course at the end of the semester. These essays are included in the corpus for this book.

Conference abstracts: As mentioned earlier, the conference abstracts were those submitted for two international conferences which were held in 2005 and 2006 in Yaounde. The themes of the two conferences were (1) "Language, Literature and Identity" and (2) "Language, Literature and Education". Abstracts were received from people who had a university affiliation, and were actively involved in research in the areas of linguistics and literary studies. The second category of abstracts came from MA and PhD students. Most of the abstracts in

this latter category were presentations of the students' on-going research. The abstracts went through a normal review process, and those that met the requirements of the conference in terms of topic relevance were accepted for presentation at the conference.

What this brief background shows is that although the three text categories represent two types of writers (students and teachers), they are largely a homogeneous genre: the soft science (English studies). Further, the writers have had almost the same kind of education and interact with one another in various ways at various levels (e.g. students vs. dissertation advisors, students vs. teachers in the classroom). They have obviously been exposed to the conventions of academic writing. On the basis of these premises, it can be assumed that the three text categories are "representative" of the average Cameroonian academic public, at least in English/literary studies. This notwithstanding, a note of caution is still necessary to accommodate possible criticism, that using students' texts and those of their teachers and experienced academics for a single study might skew the results in one way or the other, not least because the texts were also written at different periods. Truly, one cannot avoid taking some liberties in combining different texts as diverse as these for a single study. Although I take solace in the fact that the study is only an introductory account of academic writing practices in the Cameroonian university setting, I also acknowledge that such a preliminary study can only offer a general overview rather than a faithful likeness of every aspect of this vast topic in both depth and breadth.

1.3.2. The corpus-based approach

In the analysis of data both the quantitative and qualitative methods common in corpus-based investigations are used. The features investigated are retrieved from the corpus via AntConc, a freeware, multi-platform, multi-purpose corpus analysis toolkit. AntConc presents the data in a KWIC (Key Word in Context) format, in which individual instances of a word or phrase are brought together with the key word or phrase in the middle for easy scrutiny (Fig 1.1). Depending on the goal of the search at each instance, a concordance line can be stretched beyond sentence level. The number of times the target word or phrase occurs can then be counted in the different texts. This kind of quantitative evidence is further subjected to a qualitative discussion, where judgement about the significance of the regularity of the feature in question is made, comparing what is known in theoretical literature, or in similar corpus-based research, to the extent possible.