

Academic Writing in Europe: a Survey of Approaches and Problems

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Abstract

This survey sketches the new understanding of academic writing that has developed over the last two decades, from a text-based to a writer- and reader-oriented perspective, from a prescriptive to an empirical discipline. It sets academic writing in a wider context (like English for Specific Purposes and English as a *lingua franca*) and clarifies the main concepts. From a constructionist perspective, a discourse community develops through common practice, using expected schemata for instance in genres like research articles. They can be analysed empirically in corpus- and text-linguistic approaches, where at least five dimensions can be compared in empirical research: genre, academic discipline, national culture, language tradition, and language features. The problems discussed range from fundamental ones (whether a *lingua franca* like English makes non-native users of English in Europe lose national traditions) to practical ones (to what extent the data available are compatible). Despite the problems, new opportunities arise for English departments in Europe when they include an empirical discourse- and genre-based approach in their research and teaching.

1. Introduction: Understanding academic writing

Academic writing has established itself almost as an independent discipline in applied linguistics, or at least as a research-led sub-discipline in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). There is much more to it than what was taught 20 years ago: Old essay-writing focussed on language-specific student errors or creative styles; old English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focussed on discipline-specific vocabulary. The understanding of academic writing has changed fundamentally from a formal text-based perspective to a functional perspective that concentrates on the writer and the writing process and, even more, on the reader and the cognitive construction of discourse in a community (cf. Hyland 2010a, Schmied 2008, Thompson 2001). This paradigm shift applies to teaching as well as to research: Text-oriented research would, for instance, measure syntactic complexity by number of words or clauses per T-unit, or the specificity of lexemes in ontological systems. Writer-oriented research has tried “think aloud protocols” or task observations including keystroke recordings. Reader-oriented research has emphasized the mediation between writers/institutions/cultures, and conventions “describing the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow and identifying salient features of texts which allow them to engage effectively with their readers” (Hyland 2010b: 194).

2. Key concepts of academic writing

2.1. Definitions of EAP and related terms

In this survey, I see academic writing as an important, if not the most important, part of academic language behaviour in a discourse community. This discourse community uses English for Academic Purposes in research and teaching/learning, not only in universities in native-speaker cultures but also in universities where English is used as an international language or *lingua franca* at levels of international cooperation, where researchers as well as teachers and students are non-native speakers of English.

Traditionally, discussions of language use have been seen as part of ELT (English Language Teaching), or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). Today these concepts are often seen as a wide field of related terms and acronyms like EAL (English as an Additional Language), EIL (English as an International Language), ELF (English as a Lingua Franca), ESP (English for Special Purposes, or English for Specific Purposes), etc., where overlapping notions are only a matter of perspective. EAP can be seen as the “higher end” of ELF (which, in contrast to “Tourist English”, requires at least B2 in the European Framework of Reference for Languages, EFRL). EAP emphasises the common ground of specialised languages in terms of discourse or pragmatics, whereas ESP tends to emphasise the differences in terms of lexicon and idiomaticity. EAP also adds a theoretical framework to practical “writing classes”, which have spread to universities in native as well as non-native countries, and which can be seen as part of professional writing in the academic world, just like professional writing in the domains of law (e.g. legal correspondence), journalism (e.g. reportage), engineering (e.g. technical reports), marketing (e.g. advertisements), entertainment (e.g. film scripts), and literature (e.g. “creative writing” of novels).

Within this wide field of EAP, at least three levels of communities can be distinguished, and thus three types of EAP defined:

- Student English: 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).
- Doctoral English: In contrast to student writing with its focus on digesting research by others, doctoral students have to develop their own ideas, to pursue their own research agenda and to write up everything in a major contribution, which is the result of some sophisticated innovative Ph.D. project that the writer takes a long time to accomplish.

- (International) Research English: 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 has led to the standardization of peer-review procedures and the corresponding discussion of subject- and genre-specific conventions.

In contrast to student English, the latter two categories, doctoral and research English, 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 (with their MLA and the ASA/APA conventions, respectively). Such conventions – together with the specialised terminology and argumentation procedures – have made (even sub-discipline-specific) “specialised” academic writing 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 writing or Popular Academic English. This has political implications, since societies demand increasingly to be informed about public investment in universities and other research institutions.

2.2. Academic writing in the discourse community

Since I emphasize that the key concepts of academic writing have to be made accessible to students, I will adopt a student perspective in this section. I will use entries in Wikipedia (just like many students do) as a starting point and scrutinize them from a perspective of knowledge transfer to see whether there are any major discrepancies between the popular academic representations of these concepts and my more specific academic conceptualisations. The Wikipedia entry for discourse community is quite specific and very suitable for our purposes – not surprisingly since it is based explicitly on Swales (1990):

A discourse community:

1. has a broadly agreed set of common public goals.
2. has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members.
3. uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback.
4. utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
5. in addition to owning genres, it has acquired some specific lexis.
6. has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursual expertise.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_community (27/03/11)

The advantage of this entry is that it is very broad, but it also fits our concept of academic community very well, especially the emphasis on genres and lexis. The levels I have defined according to practice and expertise as student, doctoral, and research English above, each with specific genres and lexical complexity. The level-specific genres are constructed through university conventions and this construction is in line with current thinking on wider academic perspectives.

Over the last two decades, academic writing theory has been closely associated with social constructionism, and again we can use a well-founded Wikipedia entry as a starting point:

A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by humans. Socially constructed reality is seen as an ongoing, dynamic process; reality is reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of it.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism (29/03/11)

The two concepts discourse community and social constructionism in higher education can be combined in the concept of an academic community of practice:

A **community of practice (CoP)** is, according to cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991). CoPs can exist online, such as within discussion boards and newsgroups, or in real life, such as in a lunch room at work, in a field setting, on a factory floor, or elsewhere in the environment.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practise (29/03/11)

Again, this Wikipedia entry is useful since our academic community is constructed through “sharing information and experiences”, like (sub-)discipline-specific conferences. Nowadays, the “written discussion” in scientific disciplines takes mainly place in academic journals or even on pre-publication servers, since the international academic discourse is accelerated enormously.

Although conference papers and journals are the central spoken and written genres in academic communities today, there are many others. The Wikipedia entry for genre gives a crisp summary:

A text's genre may be determined by its:

1. Linguistic function.
2. Formal traits.
3. Textual organization.