Overcoming EFL Obstacles to (Reading) Academic Texts – Class Observation

Iva Čupić & Martina Klanjčić
Dag Hammarskjöld University College of International Relations and Diplomacy, Croatia

Abstract:

What are the obstacles that impede understanding and decrease proficiency in reading academic texts in ESP? Correspondingly, how can they be overcome to achieve learning outcomes of EFL courses at tertiary level? Broadly speaking, academic texts are used in numerous learning processes across various stages of study. They are designed or aimed at such a purposeso as to facilitate instruction and the transfer of knowledge in academic subjects studied at the university level by providing textual input for the conceptualization and presentation of facts and hypotheses related to students' respective fields of study. In ESP teaching they are used to introduce academic language through relevant academic content, aiming to draw upon the students' existing vocabulary base, build new lexical-semantic connections and raise the students' overall foreign language proficiency level. Upon direct class observation, the authors have found that students perceive such texts as unnecessarily complex and the language they employ as obsolete and overly pretentious to be considered instrumental. The underlying reasons for this potentially disallowing perspective can be linked to insufficient knowledge of advanced professional vocabulary, elaborate grammatical structures and rhetorical organization patterns, coupled with affective factors, often manifested in the acquired bias toward more "everyday" texts employed in previous language instruction, which provide only a limited representation of language. The role of the teacher is thus to stimulate and channel the students' professed interest and curiosity for their field of study by exploiting academic texts and various language acquisition techniques in order for students to successfully tackle demanding content and acquire new vocabulary and structures. This paper will aim to determine the common features of texts used in tertiary level ESP, namely in applied health sciences and international relations, and to explore and design effective reading techniques and language exercises that might help develop a comprehensive approach to the multilayer pattern that is academic text.

Keywords: *academic text, tertiary level ESP, learning obstacles, reading techniques*

1. Introduction: academic text

At the tertiary level of education, the academic text is used as an indispensable tool in numerous learning processes across different subjects and various stages of study. Employed to advance instruction and facilitate the transfer of knowledge in all academic subjects at the university level, it provides the necessary textual input for the presentation of facts and hypotheses related to students' specific fields of study. Regardless of the students' core academic preoccupation, a vital requirement for tackling an academic text is the theoretical knowledge of the distinctive features of academic writing. The language instructor should

familiarize the students with the characteristic features of academic texts, namely their formality, complexity, precision, explicitness and objectiveness – the properties of Standard Written English. [12]

Firstly, academic texts are more *formal* in style and register than other, more familiar types of texts which are used predominantly throughout language courses in primary and secondary education in Croatia. Moreover, they are *complex*, as demonstrated in greater lexical density and vocabulary variation, as well as elaborate grammatical structures, and, perhaps surprisingly, *precise* at the same time, clearly presenting and explicitly referring to facts and data. [12]

> *In contemporary use, geopolitics **has been widely employed** as a loose synonym for international politics. Arguments about the political effects of geography—particularly climate, topography, **arable land**, and **access to the sea**—have appeared in Western political thought since at least the ancient Greek era and were **prominent in the writings of philosophers as diverse as Aristotle (384–322 BC) and Montesquieu (1689–1745)**.* [4]

Additionally, academic texts are said to be *explicit*, signposting dependably the organization of ideas, both at the sentence and paragraph levels. [12]

> ***Considering*** *that the United Nations has an important role to play **regarding** the protection of minorities […] **Bearing in mind** the work done **so far** within the United Nations system, **in particular** by the Commission on Human Rights, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities and the bodies established **pursuant to** the International Covenants on Human Rights.* [10]

Furthermore, as academic texts employ a variety of methods to purposefully *conceal any sign of subjectivity*, they often abound with vague language and shadowy expressions that allow their authors to make personal claims professedly detached. [12]

> ***Nowhere has this been more clearly demonstrated than*** *in the former Yugoslavia, **a country viewed by peacemakers at Versailles as 'the land of the Slavs'**.* [5]

Coupled with professional vocabulary and complex grammatical patterns (the passive, inverted phrases, embedded questions, conditional clauses, etc.), it is then manifest why students often find it legitimately troublesome to fully comprehend such texts.

As the primary addressees or beneficiaries of the academic text, college students preparing for their future academic careers can benefit greatly from instruction that draws upon the features of language as well as the process of reading and gathering information. A corollary to the above statement is that the students need to become critical and active readers, approaching and transcending large and complex sets of facts and translating them into meaningful content. [1] Depending on the specific objectives and learning outcomes pre-set in the syllabi of each particular ESP course, a wide variety of academic texts is employed in the ESP classroom, from purely scholarly texts and textbook materials to legal writing, encyclopaedia entries, news reports and magazine articles, to name but a few, used to introduce general and subject-specific academic vocabulary and grammar through relevant content, from international law to the workings of the nervous system. Prior to being taught in class, such texts are methodically processed by the language instructor to optimally

combine information about the language and the reality it expresses, upholding the implicit policy that ESP courses should follow the students' core academic load. In this way the FL lecturer helps guide the students through this energy-intensive and in-depth academic process, which requires fairly large amounts of academic reading to be undertaken as part of their studies.

2. Class observation

Upon direct class observation in two seemingly dissimilar learning environments, University of Applied Health Sciences and the Dag Hammarskjöld University College of International Relations and Diplomacy, the authors have found that the students' reactions toward such texts are comparably matching: they are perceived as unnecessarily complex and the language they employ as too obsolete and archaic, even extravagant, to be considered instrumental. The underlying reasons for this potentially disallowing perspective can be linked to cognitive factors such as advanced technical vocabulary, elaborate grammatical structures and subtle rhetorical organization patterns, as well as to affective factors, often manifested in the acquired bias toward more "everyday" texts employed in previous language instruction, which provide only a limited representation of language, but are indisputably easier to comprehend and attune to.

The role of the ESP teacher is then to try to overcome both obstacles: to teach the students general academic vocabulary and introduce them to more specialized instances of academic language, as well as to motivate them to appreciate the benefits of formal discourse, which becomes the primary medium of instruction once they have started their university education.

3. Obstacles that impede understanding and decrease proficiency in reading academic texts in ESP

Starting from the most recognizable, *lexical layer of language*, students are faced with a task challenging in itself, and that is comprehending academic texts without sufficient knowledge of general academic and subject-specific terminology. Academic writing is characterized by a particular and cloistered "dialect" represented in the register of language fitting for a more formal level of expression. Words of such a distinctly formal register are not so frequent outside the academia, but are indispensable for pursuing a quality higher education.

> *__Neuronsconsist of__ three major sections: the __dendrites__, which receive impulses and __transmit__ them to the cell body which contains the __cell nucleus__. __Extending from__ the __cell body__ is the __axon__, a long single projection, which carries the impulse away from the cell body.* [3]

More profoundly, students need to understand the ways in which words in English are generally formed. Awareness of the methods of word formation helps students decode unfamiliar words and facilitates vocabulary acquisition. Many English words are loan words from Latin, which has long since become the international language of scholars. As a case in point, the word "diplomacy" itself is Latin in origin, not to mention other equally ubiquitous terms like "bilateral", "interlocutor", "negotiation", "plenipotentiary", or "respiration", "oxygen", "cavity", "gastrointestinal", all derived from Latin. While in certain areas of

academic study, such as health sciences, Latin is still instrumentally needed, there is a marked tendency to use Latin terms in scientific and technical writing in general, which unfailingly provide an air of culture and sophistication.

Semantic issues such as polysemy, synonymy and homonymy also constitute a vital step in comprehending texts at an academic level. Commonplace in Standard Written English across different fields of study in the English language, they need to be systematically introduced, expounded and employed in various activities.

> POLYSEMY: *The United Nations **observance** of International Women's Day on 8 March will reflect on how to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, building momentum for the effective implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goals.* [11] (***observance** = 1. act of watching; 2. ceremony or ritual)* [13];

> HOMONYMY: ***discreet** (modest and unpretentious) and **discrete** (separate and different*) [13];

> SYNONYMY AND ANTONYMY: *Many, for instance, automatically assume that students and teachers of politics must in some way be **biased**, finding it difficult to believe that the subject can be approached in an **impartial** and **dispassionate** manner.* [5]

In matters of phraseology, idiomatic and other fixed expressions are also relatively set and specific to particular academic fields of study**.** After the students have been introduced to relevant instances of different phrasemes used in academic context, such as Latin phrases (*persona non grata, ad hoc, alma mater, quid pro quo, sui generis*), idiomatic expressions (*landslide victory* or *megaphone diplomacy*), or abbreviations (*NATO, MRI*), they are provided with examples demonstrating their usage. In that way they can proceed to use them independently.

Secondly, on the *syntactic level*, students need to understand the highly developed and internally consistent grammar of academic discourse, and consolidate some of the key grammatical areas for academic reading, such as noun phrases, the passive voice, inverted structures, subordinate clauses and prepositional phrases, to name but a few. [7]

> PASSIVE: *The bones in a synovial joint **are surrounded** by a joint capsule **composed of** fibrous tissue. Ligaments anchor one bone to another and thereby add considerable strength to the joint capsule in critical areas. Bones at the joint **are covered** with a smooth, glistening white tissue **called** the articular cartilage.* [3] [8]

For competent users of foreign languages, the passive is a frequent tool of formal expression. It has an innate capability to turn an utterance into a more impersonal, detached and thus more formal statement by removing the agent (subject) of the action from the sentence, which is a requirement in technical, scientific and academic writing. Furthermore, another convenient device in achieving formality and a certain elegance of expression is the inverted sentence (*Should you require any additional information, feel free to contact us*). Also, complex sentences, abundant attribution and prepositional phrases are some of the most prominent features of academic writing.

This development began after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and has been sanctioned and escalated by bipartisan executive and legislative actions, without dissent from the general public. As a result, our country can no longer speak with moral authority on these critical issues. [2]

An excellent form of activity that helps integrate the students' syntactic knowledge in achieving and ascertaining comprehension, open-cloze exercises serve as an extensive activity to consolidate key grammatical areas of formal writing.

Conservative nationalism tends _____ (TO) develop in established nation-states rather than in _____ (ONES) that are in the process of nation building. It is typically inspired _____ (BY) the perception that the nation is somehow _____ (UNDER) threat, _____ (EITHER) from the inside or the outside. [5]

Thirdly, relating to *paragraph cohesion*, academic texts conform to a defined structure of argumentation, which means that students need to learn how to recognize and use different reference words and phrases that build and present arguments in the text. Learning about paragraph coherence (main ideas and supporting details, transitions between paragraphs) and raising awareness of the function of transitional markers (outlining different relationships and sequences such as time, place, examples, established order of importance, cause and effect, addition, difference and similarity, etc.) facilitates understanding and fosters mastery of language.

☐ **At various times**, *nationalism has been progressive and reactionary, democratic and authoritarian, liberating and oppressive, and left-wing and right-wing.*

☐ **For this reason**, *it is perhaps better to view nationalism not as a single or coherent political phenomenon, but as a series of 'nationalisms': that is, as a complex of traditions that share but one characteristic – each, in its own particular way, acknowledges the central political importance of the nation.*

☐ *Immense controversy surrounds the political character of nationalism.*

☐ **Indeed**, *nationalism shows every sign of suffering from the political equivalent of multiple-personality syndrome.*

☐ **On the one hand**, *nationalism can appear to be a progressive and liberating force, offering the prospect of national unity or independence.*

☐ **On the other**, *it can be an irrational and reactionary creed that allows political leaders to conduct policies of military expansion and war in the name of the nation.* [5]

Finally, on the level of *subject matter*, it is important that instructors appreciate the fact that their students are only beginning to tackle certain academic issues in their native language, which only makes it more difficult for them to comprehend such texts, sometimes to the point of intelligibility. In the example below, the students engage in translation (from English into Croatian and vice versa) after they have thoroughly read the original text. This is used as a method of recycling vocabulary, as well as using more complex grammatical and rhetorical structures through guided translation.

Institucije države (državni aparat, sudovi, policija, vojska, sustav socijalne skrbi i tako dalje) mogu se smatrati 'javnima' u tom smislu što su odgovorne za kolektivnu

*organizaciju života zajednice. Štoviše, financiraju se o trošku javnosti, putem oporezivanja. **Key words: and so forth; be regarded; at the expense; taxation***
*The institutions of the state (the apparatus of government, the courts, the police, the army, the social-security system **and so forth**) can **be regarded** as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organization of community life. Moreover, they are funded **at the** public's **expense**, out of **taxation**. [5]*

4. Outline of learning outcomes of tertiary level ESP courses
The ultimate goal of all the analysed exercises and issues is that the students successfully overcome them in order to achieve the learning outcomes set in the course syllabi, some of which may be defined as follows: identifying, defining, acquiring and using key technical vocabulary in their specific fields of study (in the authors' case, applied health sciences and international relations and diplomacy); raising and developing awareness of semantic similarities and discrepancies (false friends, synonymy, polysemy, homonymy, etc.) between English and Croatian languages; and approaching academic texts used in language instruction analytically and responding to them critically.

5. The role of the teacher
As seen throughout the examples introduced in this paper, the role of the teacher is to stimulate and channel the students' professed interest and whet their intellectual curiosity for the field of study they are engaged in by exploiting academic texts and various language acquisition techniques in order for students to master demanding content and acquire and use new vocabulary, as well as to recognize and employ new language patterns and grammatical and rhetorical structures.

6. Conclusion
The immediate purpose of the approach to academic texts in tertiary level ESP/EAP advanced in this paper is to help students arrive at a profound and comprehensive understanding of texts. Through guided academic endeavour, they will learn how to approach academic input more deeply and therefore more instrumentally, going beyond simple understanding of words and summarizing of main ideas. The final goal of EAP should be reflected in the students' ability to recognize and differentiate between facts and opinions; to come up with their own evaluative filter that will help them challenge any assumption and discern any error; to integrate information from multiple sources while drawing their own conclusions. This approach, which advocates that the answers to questions raised in class be proactively worked out rather than simply found, develops academic acuity and professional and technical competence. The students, albeit grudgingly, at least in the initial stages, soon begin to recognize and appreciate the advantage of the masterly command of academic texts, which helps them progress and mature intellectually across various subjects and stages of study.

References:

[1] Burgmeier, A. (2009). *Inside Reading: The Academic Word List in Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

[2] Carter, J. (2012). A Cruel and Unusual Record. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/opinion/americas-shameful-human-rights-record.html?_r=0

[3] Chabner, D. (2014). *The Language of Medicine, Tenth Edition*. Elsevier Saunders

[4] Deudney, D.H. (2016). *Geopolitics*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved from http://www.britannica.com/topic/geopolitics

[5] Heywood, A. (2007). *Politics,* London: Palgrave Macmillan

[6] *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary.*Retrieved from www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary

[7] Paterson, K. & Wedge, R. (2013). *Oxford Grammar for EAP*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

[8] Režić, P., & Žurić Havelka, S. *Introduction to Basic Medical Terminology for Health Professions.* (2013). Zagreb: Zdravstveno veleučilište

[9] United Nations. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* (1948). Retrieved from http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html

[10] UN Documents: Gathering a body of global agreements. *Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.* (18 December 1992). Retrieved from http://www.un-documents.net/a47r135.htm

[11] UN Women. International Women's Day 2016. (2016) Retrieved from http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/international-womens-day

[12] Using English for Academic Purposes. *Features of Academic Writing*. Retrieved from http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/complex.htm

[13] Waite, M., Hollingworth, L. & Marshall D. (eds.). (2006). *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus (3rd ed.).* Oxford: Oxford University Press