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Academic writing—A challenge in translator training

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Abstract

Studies and articles presenting new discoveries, scientific results are usually published in a world language, most often in English, therefore there is a great need to translate these articles in other languages, so that representatives of different professions may keep up with international development. In many cases, these translations are done by specialised translators. Translating academic writing can be challenging in several respects, as it is an accurate, standardised, normative language form, the use of which requires thorough knowledge and experience from the part of the translator. In our study, we examine whether translator trainees at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania are aware of the characteristics of academic writing and are prepared to write academic text, discussing the eventual difficulties that should be addressed in the training process.

Keywords: Academic writing, translator training, style, paraphrasing, proof-reading.

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1. Introduction

Students usually face a variety of writing tasks throughout their chosen degree programs. These tasks become progressively more demanding and complex, and in general they have to be written in academic style. Translator trainees need to produce written texts both in their native language and in the second or foreign language(es), they are studying to translate from or into. Translator trainees at Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania study three languages—their native language, Hungarian; their second language Romanian, which is the official language of the country and English or German, as a foreign or third language. The target group of this study consists of students who chose English as their third or foreign language, and during their studies they are expected to read and write several essays and papers in this language. They learn about the characteristics of academic writing in all the three studied languages. In translation practice classes, which constitute a significant part of the curriculum, they are often asked to translate parts of academic texts, such as abstracts, essays, book reviews, scientific articles, extracts from specialised journals or books related to various domains. Their final and most demanding written assignment is their state examination paper, which is expected to be written in English.

In our study, we examine with the help of a test, whether translator trainees in their third (final) year of studies are aware of the characteristics of academic writing in English, after attending a course on this topic. Our purpose is to assess the eventual difficulties that should be addressed more thoroughly in the training process.

2. Academic writing in English and related course materials

Insert several definitions can be found of academic writing. A broad definition would be that ‘academic writing is any writing done to fulfil a requirement of a college or university. Academic writing is also used for publications that are read by teachers and researchers or presented at conferences. A very broad definition of academic writing could include any writing assignment given in an academic setting’. A slightly more detailed variant: ‘Academic writing has been found to represent the most important single field of educated communication, surpassing for instance fiction. As well as being a standardised, accurate, normative form of language, academic writing tends to be a more professional form of writing. As a rule, it is employed among (and between) scholars. This kind of writing naturally requires research, in-depth analysis, summarising, along with regular editing and proofreading. Academic writing is instrumental to hundreds of topics and (sub)fields’ (Manea & Manea, 2013).

Regarding our target group’s needs, we are mainly interested in academic writing and communication in English. English for academic purposes (EAP) as a distinct field within language learning and teaching emerged as a result of the global need to write and publish scientific discoveries and research results in an international language. As Hamp-Lyons (2011) states, it has developed from the field of English for specific purposes (ESP), focusing on academic contexts. By now, also closely related to ESP and teaching of English as a second or foreign language, EAP has become an independent academic field with an identity of its own, widely researched and taught in university systems, with its own *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. The editors of this journal define EAP as an interdisciplinary domain related ‘to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This takes practitioners beyond preparing learners for study in English to developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts’ (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2).

Several course books have been written on academic writing or EAP in order to guide and prepare students and researchers who are expected or wish to write and communicate in English (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Jordan, 1997; 2003; Lynch & Anderson, 2013; Norris, 2015; Supriyanto, 2002; Swales & Feak,

2012; Zemach & Rumisek, 2005). The five-level Longman Academic Writing Series, guiding students from the basic level of composing sentences and paragraphs to writing complex academic essays and research papers, also serves those who intend to develop their academic writing skills in English (Butler, 2012; Hogue, 2016; Meyers, 2013; Oshima & Hogue, 2016a; 2016b).

These course books cover various aspects and features of academic writing focusing in various degrees on issues related to its general characteristics, different stages and procedures of the writing process, the structure of scientific articles and essays, certain important elements of writing and issues related to the accuracy and appropriateness of grammatical structures and vocabulary. They offer practice materials, exercises with key and samples of academic writing as well, also highlighting some of the most frequent language difficulties, types of language errors occurring in this domain and their possible causes.

All these aspects can be explained, demonstrated and practiced within a course targeting the development of students' academic writing skills. Our course so far has been based mainly on Bailey's (2006) book, supplemented with information, examples and exercises from other sources, wherever it was necessary

3. The content of the course

Presently, we teach academic writing within the framework of the ESP course for translator trainees, in the last semester of their studies, when they are also preparing their state examination paper. Therefore, the sample texts we introduce originate from specialised texts from various fields, such as engineering, environmental research, medicine, pharmacy and pharmacology, agricultural studies, economy and finances, law, education and sports.

After presenting and discussing the origin, definition and some general characteristics of academic writing (such as the importance of planning before writing and of creating an outline highlighting certain essential relationships between topics and relevant information that should be included; formality of tone, clarity and precision of language; usually a third-person point of view; deductive reasoning and an analytical approach), we focus on the writing process, including issues related to the following: the structure of academic writing; how to write academically; definition of plagiarism and how to avoid it; titles and outlines; reading about the subject—critical reading; purpose and register; identifying key points and note-making; paraphrasing in note-making and summary writing; combining different sources; structuring ideas and organising paragraphs; organising the main body; introductions; conclusions; rewriting, proof-reading.

The following part of the course deals with the elements of academic writing, 'the various skills that are needed for most types of academic writing, whether it is a short report, a long essay or a dissertation' (Bailey, 2006, p. 65): argument, cause and effect, cohesion, comparison, definitions, discussion, examples, generalisations, using numbers, writing opening paragraphs, references and quotations, restatement and repetition, style, synonyms and variation in sentence length.

This part is followed by aspects of accuracy in academic writing. The problems included in the course have been chosen on the basis that they often cause difficulty and confusion for students. However, at this point, our purpose is not to deliver a grammar course. Our students are expected to possess a thorough knowledge of English grammar which help them focus on specific areas related to academic writing, such as abbreviations, academic vocabulary, caution, conjunctions, issues related to the use of countable, uncountable and umbrella nouns, use of prefixes and suffixes and aspects related to verbs (formality, use of modals, passive voice and verbs of reference).

The last part of the course is about translating academic writing—its challenges, the necessary skills to do it, and its potential for future translators. Academic translations are complex endeavours, including challenges that range from specific conventions and structures, technical terminology and genre conventions to different cultural issues. Nowadays, there is a growing need for academic

translations, due to the fact that scholars from various fields often need help in translating various written works, such as academic books, dissertations, essays, theses, lectures, research proposals and abstracts. Therefore, translator trainees should consider that developing their academic writing skills may be a good investment regarding their future profession.

4. About the assessed skills

In the assessment, we applied a practical approach, namely, we were interested in students' ability to apply what had been presented, discussed and practiced during the course, and not in how much theory they can remember and reproduce. When designing and assembling the tasks for the test, we intended to focus on skills which in our experience often cause difficulties for students when writing their state examination paper and also when translating academic writing. Accordingly, the test consisted of three tasks measuring (1) paraphrasing, (2) use of academic style and (3) proof reading. In the process of solving these tasks knowledge of accuracy in academic writing is indispensable; therefore, issues related to the use of English grammar, academic vocabulary, caution, conjunctions, issues related to the use of countable, uncountable and umbrella nouns, use of prefixes and suffixes, and various issues related to verbs and other structures are also tested.

1. Paraphrasing. In order to support one's own ideas and research, in academic writing it is necessary to mention and discuss what other researchers wrote about the topic. To avoid the risk of plagiarism and inserting long quotations in a paper, it is necessary to paraphrase the source texts. Students often think, that if they alter a few words in a sentence, or they copy only certain parts of sentences from a source text, it will not be noticed. But, paraphrasing means more than that. Even though writers are not expected to change every word of the source text, their version should be substantially different. According to Bailey (2006, p. 29), 'paraphrasing involves changing a text so that it is quite different from the source, while retaining the meaning'. There are different techniques to achieve this goal, and most of them include isolating the essential ideas from the original text, restructuring sentences by changing the form of words and syntax, and using synonyms where possible. For example Jordan (2003, p. 93–94) describes four and Bailey (2006, p. 29–30) describes three techniques for rewriting a text in order to include it in our writing. Both of them propose changing the vocabulary by using synonyms (e.g., She examined the difficulties that... → She investigated the problems that...; studies → research, mud → deposits, growth → rise), and changing word class (e.g., from verb to noun phrase: the reports were completed in April → the completion of the reports in April...; mountainous (adj.) regions → in the mountains (n.); become the world's dominant (adj.) car company → dominated (v.) the world's car companies). Besides these Bailey also recommends changing word order (e.g., Ancient Egypt collapsed → the collapse of Egyptian society; At this time, trades unions became increasingly militant in defence of their members' jobs. → At this time increasingly militant trades unions defended their members' jobs.), and Jordan suggests changing the verb form (e.g., from active to passive: They analysed the students' difficulties → The students' difficulties were analysed...) and using synthesis by summarising and combining more, supporting or opposing viewpoints.
2. Academic style. Jordan (2003) defines the main features of academic writing as follows: 'it is formal in an impersonal or objective style (often using impersonal pronouns and phrases and passive verb forms); cautious language is frequently used in reporting research and making claims; vocabulary appropriate for particular academic context is used (this may involve specialist or technical words); the structure of the writing will vary according to the particular type (genre), for example, essay, report, thesis etc.' (p. 88). Bailey (2006) admits that it is not easy to formulate general rules for academic style. These may depend on subject areas, and in order to develop the skill to decide what is acceptable or unacceptable one should read numerous articles and books in his/her specific domain to gain experience in using academic style. Accordingly, some of the general advice proposed by Jordan (2003) and Bailey (2006) regarding academic style are the following:
 - Tips for appropriate written academic English:

- Use of tentative and cautious language expressed by
 - modal verbs (may, might, will, would, can and could)
 - other verbs (e.g., appear, estimate, suggest, assume and indicate)
 - impersonal verb phrases (e.g., it appears to/that...; it tends to be...)
 - adverbs (e.g., perhaps, probably, hardly, seemingly, apparently)
 - adjectives (e.g., probable, possible, apparent)
 - nouns (e.g., claim, assumption, likelihood, evidence, possibility)
 - Use of formal, standard language (e.g., formal verbs, such as conduct, discover, investigate)
 - Precision when dealing with figures or facts
 - Things to be avoided in written academic English:
 - Contractions (e.g., didn't or they've)
 - Hesitations (e.g., well, you know)
 - Phrasal or prepositional verbs (e.g., carry out, find out, look into)
 - Euphemisms (e.g., to pass away)
 - Colloquial vocabulary (e.g., dad, guy)
 - Idioms (e.g., By the end of the semester most students were in the red.)
 - Absolute statements (e.g., education reduces crime)
 - Adverbs showing personal attitude (e.g., remarkably, fortunately and surprisingly)
 - Overuse of passive
 - Use of like for introducing examples (such as or for instance should be used instead)
 - Use of thing and its combinations (factor, issue, topic may be used instead)
 - Use of lots of (significant / considerable number should be used instead)
 - Use of little/big (small/large should be used instead)
 - Use of get phrases (e.g., instead of get better/worse we can use improve or deteriorate)
 - Use of simplistic good/bad (instead positive/negative can be used—e.g., the positive aspects of the changes...)
3. Proof reading. The process of proof-reading refers to the activity of finding and correcting any mistakes in a written text before submitting it to a teacher, printing it or making it available online, sending it to a publisher or a client (in case of translations). In case of academic texts, besides checking grammar, spelling and punctuation, proof-reading also involves checking style-related features. It is widely recommended to ask a second or third person (friend, colleague, tutor, a native speaker, if available) to proof-read our work, because we may not be able to notice some of our own errors or mistakes.

5. The test and the results

The test designed to assess translator trainees' academic writing skills, consisted of three tasks. The total score was 100 points, including 40 points for the first task (1) (measuring paraphrasing skills), 30 points for the second task (2) (assessing the use of academic style), and 30 points for the third task (3) assessing proof-reading. The test was completed by 22 third-year translator trainees. Based on the results, students achieved the highest scores in paraphrasing, and the lowest in using academic style, as it is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Average test results

	Paraphrasing	Style	Proof-reading
Maximum score	40	30	30
Students' averages	27.1	17.6	19.3
Percentage of successful solutions	67.7%	58.6%	64.3%

In order to give a deeper insight, we also present the results in more details, achieved in the three different tasks.

- (1). The first part of the test assessing paraphrasing skills consisted of a task with nine items checking the use of different paraphrasing techniques, and a paragraph which had to be paraphrased. In the first three items 11 words had to be changed by using synonyms, in the next three items the word class of 8 words had to be changed and other necessary modifications performed regarding the structure of the sentence, and in the last three items the word order of three sentences had to be altered. Finally, the given paragraph had to be paraphrased using all the three previously mentioned techniques. As it is shown in Table 2, using synonyms and changing word order proved to be easier for the students than changing word class.

Table 2. Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing	Using synonyms (e.g., <i>growth</i> → <i>rise</i> ; <i>parallels</i> → <i>matches</i>)	Changing word class (e.g., ... <i>it became the world's dominant car company</i> → ... <i>it dominated the world's car companies</i>)	Changing the word order (e.g., <i>Today the industry owns some of the strongest brands in the world.</i> → <i>Some of the strongest brands in the world are today owned by the industry.</i>)	Paraphrasing a paragraph with the three previous techniques
Maximum score	10	10	10	10
Students' averages	7.8	4.7	7.4	7.3

4. The second part of the test assessing the use of academic style consisted of a task with nine items. In this task students had to identify the examples of poor style in given sentences and rewrite them in a more suitable way (Table 3). This proved to be the most difficult task from the three. It is not surprising if we consider that students encounter academic style significantly more rarely than everyday language. Based on the results, the most difficult item was the one where they had to identify an absolute statement and rephrase it in a more cautious style. But as it is shown in Table 3, the identification and correction of several other issues also caused difficulties for the students.

Table 3. Style

Examples of poor style to be rephrased	Achievable points	Achieved average	Average of successful solutions in %
informal use of the personal pronoun <i>you</i>	3	2.3	76.6%
use of contraction (<i>can't</i>)	3	2.1	70%
use of <i>lots of</i> (<i>lots of people think</i> → <i>it is widely believed</i>)	3	1.9	63.3%
use of <i>get</i> phrase (<i>get worse</i> → <i>deteriorate</i>)	3	1.8	60%
use of phrasal verbs (<i>go up</i> → <i>increase</i>)	3	1.6	53.3%
use of ' <i>big</i> ' (<i>big risk</i> → <i>significant risk</i>)	3	1.6	53.3%
adverbs showing personal attitude (<i>sadly</i> , <i>regrettably</i>)	3	1.4	46.6%
colloquial vocabulary (<i>kids</i> → <i>children</i>)	3	1.3	43.3%
use of <i>like</i> for introducing examples (<i>crime like murder</i> → <i>crime, such as murder</i>)	3	1.2	40%
absolute statement (<i>... will become criminals</i> → <i>... may become criminals</i>)	3	0.8	26.6 %

5. The third part of the test assessing proof-reading skills consisted of a task with six items (six sentences), where students had to identify and correct the errors, and an extract from an essay, also containing several errors to be corrected. A total of 30 errors of different types—factual, word ending, tense, vocabulary, spelling, singular/plural, word order, missing word, unnecessary word and wrong preposition—had to be identified and corrected. As it is presented in Table 4, the majority of the students managed to identify and correct the tense and spelling mistakes, and 75% of them the factual and mistakes related to singular/plural forms. Issues regarding word ending, word order and vocabulary seemed to be the most difficult to observe and modify.

Table 4. Proof-reading

Error types	Achievable points	Average of achieved points	Average of successful solutions in percentage
Tense	3	2.6	86.6%
Spelling	3	2.6	86.6%
Factual	2	1.5	75%
Sg./Pl.	2	1.5	75%
Unnecessary word	2	1.4	70%
Missing word	3	2	66.6%
Wrong preposition	3	2	66.6%
Vocabulary	6	3.3	55%
Word order	2	1.1	55%
Word ending	4	1.4	35%

6. Conclusions

When we discuss the results, we must not forget that it is difficult to read and write academic texts even in our native language, not to mention a foreign one. Based on the results, it can be concluded that many of the students have not yet reached a level of English necessary for academic writing. In the case of rephrasing and corrections, in many cases, mistakes were made or remained undetected not necessarily because of the lack of academic writing skills, but because of inadequate language knowledge. For example, the errors that had to be identified in the third task would be considered errors in any kind of written texts, not only in academic writing. In the first two tasks, meaningless sentences in many cases revealed that the students might not have understood the original sentence well enough.

So, first and foremost, language skills should be raised to a level necessary for academic writing and translation. Based on the results it is also important to focus more on teaching the characteristics of academic style. In order to be able to produce academic texts in a more appropriate style, students should read such works more frequently. In the teaching process, several examples and tasks can be used to raise awareness of the issues of academic style. In this survey, we were not able to measure all the skills related to academic writing, such as the writing process or the translation-related elements. This may be the topic of another study.

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