ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES IN ADVANCED ACADEMIC LITERACY

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Oktay YAĞIZ

Atatürk Üniversitesi, Kazım Karabekir Eğitim Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Anabilim Dalı

Prof.Dr. Kemalettin YİĞİTER

İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the academic writing literature at the tertiary level. As English uninterruptedly expands as the leading language for dissemination of academic knowledge then the question of writing effectively and in expected ways causes considerable challenges to students requiring graduates to learn to master and so as to succeed in the academia. Many Turkish students until embarking on their graduate studies appear not to have learned how to write systematically and gained adequate writing experiences except being instructed to be grammatically correct and writing in certain number of paragraphs. Unlike free writing and narrative expression, academic writing requires students to adopt a different kind of language forcing them to master the transition from common to academic language. Writers who cannot conform to the conventions and norms of academic language can hardly be recognized in the academic world. To provide the right words in English to express ideas appropriately and accurately is a pervasive difficulty for many EFL/ESL writers due to partly L2 writers' dependence on the translation of their native language into the English or cultural differences between two languages' modes of expression. Therefore, explicit academic writing instruction both in L1 and L2 in educational life is suggested.

Key Words: Academic Writing, Higher education, Academic Literacy.

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı üniversite düzeyinde akademik yazma ile ilgili bir alan yazın incelemesi ortaya koymaktır. İngilizce'nin, akademik bilginin ortaya konması açısından tek dil olmaya doğru ilerlemesi gözönünde bulundurulduğunda, doğru ve beklendiği gibi bir yazım konusu, akademik sahada ilerlemek isteyenler için önemli zorluklara neden olmaktadır. Birçok Türk üniversite öğrencileri, lisansüstü çalışmalara başlayıncaya kadar dilbilgisel olarak doğru yazılan birkaç paragraf yazımı dışında sistematik yazım konusunda yeterli bir eğitim almamakta ve yeterli yazım deneyimi kazanamamaktadırlar. Ancak, serbest yazım ve öykülemeden farklı olarak, akademik yazım, öğrencilerin genel yazım şekillerinden ayrı olan bir dile geçiş yapmalarını zorunlu kılar. Akademik yazım norm ve geleneklerine geçişi sağlayamayan yazarların ise, akademik sahada var olmaları oldukça zor hale gelir. İfadeleri doğru ve uygun bir dille yazabilme işi, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak kullananlar için, özellikle ana dilden çeviri yapmaya olan bağmlılık ya da kültürel farklılıklardan dolayı yaygın bir zorluk olarak görülür. Bu nedenle, gerek ana dilde gerekse hedef dilde sistemli bir akademik yazım dersinin öğrenicilere verilmesi önerilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akademik yazım, Yükseköğrenim, Akademik Okuryazarlık

Introduction

Scholarly writing is central to an academic's professional life. Academic writers are not solely expected to produce texts that will conceivably represent an external reality, but to be able to use language to offer a salient and dependable illustration of themselves and their work, and to establish social relations with readers through acknowledging and negotiating. The ability of writers to control the level of identity in their texts, claiming solidarity with readers, evaluating what is available, and acknowledging alternative views is recognized as a key feature of successful academic writing and is demanded in the competitive academia.

If the currency of academic life is scholarly publishing, presenting a research study, and writing a thesis or dissertation, as Sullivan (1996) states, then these difficulties and challenges, in parallel with the background and the processes that graduate students experience, deserve careful attention.

However, not only demonstrating knowledge but also using that knowledge to argue logically and coherently appears to be a severe difficulty for non-native graduate students emanating from varying linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Moreover, the increasing number of graduate students or the learners of English for academic purposes forces the relevant field to revisit the needs of novice scholars.

The literature on academic writing strongly suggests that this is not an easy process, and that even the most experienced academic writers encounter difficulties, challenges and obstacles in their efforts to write productively and effectively (Mc. Grail, Rickard, Jones, 2006; Hinkel, 2004; Salager-Meyer, 2008; Hemmings, Rushbrook & Smith, 2007; McCormick& Whittington, 2000) For example, many academics in current university environments feel they lack experience and expertise in writing for scholarly publication (Murray, 2001). Nevertheless, the assumption persists that if you are an academic, you are automatically both able and willing to write (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1998).

Difficulties encountered by L2 writers at a wide range of proficiency have been subjects of ongoing studies (Braine, 1995; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Johns, 1990; Johns, 1993; Johns, 1995; Wikborg, 1990, Evans & Green, 2007). Admittedly, by having obtained a bachelor's degree, a minimal requirement for attempting graduate study, graduate students certainly possess some degree of writing competence. These factors and pertinent challenges have been examined from two axes which are discursive and affective. This is especially useful to support academics for their scholarly output by providing external motivation, building confidence and by challenging the reasons for not developing writing skills and writing productivity.

Discursive Factors and Difficulties

Language use matters and is a part of the assessment process. On the array of studies which are based on discursive difficulties in academic writing in the literature, grammatical and lexical difficulties at sentence and paragraph level, issue of formality, audience concern, coherence, cohesion and organization difficulties, and use of hedging to indicate caution expected by the academic community can be cumulated as the phenomena that consume considerable amount of time and effort en route from novice researcher to a professional academic writer. Buckingham's one of the interviewees hereby summarizes the discursive difficulties of a Turkish writer in English scholarly writing:

I still have difficulties with articles, punctuation, long sentences, organization of ideas sometimes; my language is not formal enough – I don't always know when to use daily language in writing. And getting the tone and force of a proposition right – I want to disagree or criticize something but I have to be very careful about how I do it, or I want to introduce something, an idea, and I have to be careful about how I phrase it. (2008:8)

Grammatical Difficulties at Sentence and Paragraph Levels

Though the notion of English for academic purposes writing pedagogy tends to focus more on the macro- or structural levels of organization, accuracy at sentence and paragraph level is also of considerable importance.

Sentence level features encompass grammatical accuracy and appropriateness, vocabulary size and appropriateness, spelling and punctuation accuracy. There appears no doubt that L2 graduate writers usually have more problems than native speakers. As Celce-Murcia (1991) emphasizes that for educated, academically bound, and advanced L2 learners, grammar instruction is essential if they are to achieve their educational and professional goals. Without instruction and learning how to construct L2 academic text NNS students often find themselves at a great disadvantage in their academic and professional careers (Hinkel, 2004: 37).

Other researchers, meanwhile, highlight the significance of grammatical accuracy in L2 academic writing. A formal instruction, therefore, is a must so that linguistic accuracy can be developed for being engaged in a planned both spoken and written discourse and improve the competence per se (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Ellis, 1990; Schmidt, 1993).

As for the grammatical features of different communication types, Coxhead and Byrd (2007: 134) characterize academic prose by the following grammatical features in line with literature:

_ *Long complicated noun phrases with nouns more often followed by prepositional phrases than by relative clauses,*
_ *Long nouns, big words, and a tendency to use words of Latin or Greek origin rather than the simpler Anglo-Saxon word base of everyday conversation,*
_ *Lots of different words (especially compared to friendly conversation with its limited range of often repeated words),*
_ *Simple present tense verbs in generalizations and statements of theory,*
_ *A limited range of verbs with be, have, seem often repeated,*
_ *Frequent use of the passive voice (usually without a by-phrase),*
_ *Use of adverbial phrases to indicate location inside the text (e.g., in the next chapter, etc.).*

The distinct nature of EFL/ESL grammar and grammar-writing instruction, which are verb centered, and academic prose, rather noun centered, should be acknowledged. Notwithstanding, academic text is made up with particular kinds of nouns combined with certain verbs and used with an array of grammatical features expected (Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004; Byrd, 2005; Henry & Roseberry, 2001).

The reason for the difficulties and problematic situation in the area of structural and lexical field of L2 writers can be attributed to the approach which tends to isolate grammar from the lexical and discourse features of a text. This is why; grammatical accuracy might still be time-consuming for many advanced level L2 writers.

At this point, Coxhead and Byrd (2007) clarify the vague circumstance of grammar teaching in writing classroom, especially for the adult learners regarding the fact that linguistic resources are to be developed for communicative competence as academic writers.

Noticing, analyzing and practising the effect of grammatical features on context, discourse and text such as on tense use in generalizations, discourse functions of impersonal pronouns, or hedging functions of modal verbs, and parallel phrase constructions which are amply given place in almost all academic texts can help students overcome syntactic difficulties.

Lexical Difficulties and Issue of Formality

Communicating new knowledge to the other members of the academic community, and the common way of transmitting scientific research by means of publication of research articles, conference papers and/or thesis entails a good command of the discourse conventions which characterize scientific writing. Therefore, formal vocabulary knowledge for composing is of critical importance.

Notwithstanding, transcending from everyday ways of expressing meaning to the specialized academic language in an academic discourse community is perceived as a major obstacle for L2 novice writers. For example, this problem has been identified by non-English speaking graduate students in the US (Dong, 1998) and Chinese researchers in Hong Kong (Flowerdew, 1999), and Okamura (2006) in Japan.

According to Hyland, multiword expressions are an important component of fluent linguistic production and a key factor in successful language learning (2008 :4). He further notes that lexical bundles are crucial for composing academic discourse and are a major instrument for differentiating written texts by discipline. Biber et al. (1999) found that lexical bundles make up approximately 20% of all academic texts. McCully (1985) argues that use of these recurring word combinations reflect the proficiency of language in particular registers, including academic writing. Conversely, the absence of such formulaic patterns may imply the lack of fluency of a novice in a given community.

Haswell (1991: 236) maintained that ''there can be little doubt that as writers mature they rely more and more on collocations and that the lesser use of them accounts for some characteristic behavior of apprentice writers''.

Lexical bundles are extended collocations, sequences of three or more words that statistically co-occur in a register (Cortes, 2004: 400). Some examples of these word combinations in academic prose are *as a result of, on the other hand, in terms of, from the point of view, and it is likely to.* Biber et al. (1999: 990) defined lexical bundles as ''recurrent expressions, regardless of their idiomaticity, and regardless of their structural status'', simple sequences of words that commonly co-occur in natural language use. Frequency of occurrence is the defining characteristic for lexical bundles: a bundle has to occur more than 20 times in a million words to qualify, but many bundles occur over 100 times in a million words in certain registers.

In academic prose, 60% of the bundles are phrasal, parts of which noun phrases or prepositional phrases, as *in the case of, as a result of, on the basis of*, and *on the other hand* (Cortes, 2004). Lexical bundles are usually not complete and not idiomatic in meaning, but they serve important discourse functions in both spoken language and written texts (Biber & Barbieri, 2007).

Although lexical bundles are very frequent in published academic prose, the function of these expressions, introducing and encouraging students to use them appear to be

inadequately emphasized and becomes the pivot lexical difficulty for a writer. Instead, students' awareness can be enhanced introducing some of these lexical bundles going beyond single words two-word combinations to longer phrases, phrases fragments, or clause fragments.

As a result, students should have a better understanding of academic readings and be able to use these bundles in a more appropriate way in academic writing. In this way, both native and non-native speakers may feel more confident using other words or expressions to convey these functions.

When dealing with the teaching of collocations, she suggests helping students understand the types of frequent fixed expressions they encounter in their readings and become explicitly aware of their uses. Other studies have suggested different ways of introducing students to the use of frequently occurring word combinations.

Jones and Haywood (2004) note that the absence of these expressions in students' academic writing may result in novice writing. To assist students to reach this skill and knowledge needed to become effective learners of new words and their associated grammar, teachers must provide them with information about academic language through task-based activities along with the scaffolding (Cotterall & Cohen, 2003). Demonstrating the necessary level of formality and appropriateness is one of the important difficulties that EFL novice writers have in lexical choice, in an attempt to fill this vacuum, identifying academic writing styles in a wide variety of writing practice and recommendations, needs to be explicitly highlighted.

Audience Awareness

Academic writing encompasses more than simply transfer of general conventions of writing, but requires writer to have specific knowledge of disciplinary thought and communication processes. Beside academic writer is controlled by the considerably sophisticated writing conventions, the academic text must be exposed saliently and must involve appropriate audience relationships.

In most academic writing textbooks and courses students are encouraged to consider their audience and to write regarding their interests, background knowledge and expectations of readers in mind so that they can follow argument and feel that they are being taken into consideration by the writer (Hyland, 2005: 364).

In order to engage their readers in the text, expert writers are able to present their ideas with a textual voice in ways that will be seen as both credible and persuasive. The term engagement has been used to refer to the bundle of rhetorical strategies writers use to recognize the presence of their readers to bring them explicitly into their texts (Hyland, 2005: 365). For example, asking questions, making suggestions and addressing readers directly represent some of the examples of writer's dialogic awareness. In this case, readers act as real players in the discourse rather than simply as passive observers of the discussion.

In recent years, how authors actively try to involve the reader in the communication process has been explored (Hyland, 2001, 2005). Since interpersonal features influence the perceptions of audience in different genres and contexts and thus rhetorical choices, these issues should be explored explicitly. Through this way, novice writers' awareness can be developed and they can be assisted to gain greater control on their writing to meet the challenges of academic writing in a foreign language.

Hedging in Academic Text

As an essential component of formal writing, hedges are generally the linguistic devices which display hesitation and uncertainty, show politeness, and indirectness and have been one of the research fields devoted in academic prose.

When a writer makes any claim or put forward an evaluation, the writer needs to make a statement "cautiously, accurately and modestly to meet discourse community expectations and to gain acceptance for their statements" (Hyland, 1996 :477). Analyses of large English language corpora have underlined the importance and prevalence of various types of hedging devices in academic prose (Biber, 1988; Hoye, 1997).

The notion of hedging in academic writing has been discussed more in detail by other researchers (Swales, 1990; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Hyland 1988). Swales (1990: 175) refers to hedges as rhetorical devices for projecting honesty, modesty, and proper caution in self-reports and for diplomatically creating space in areas heavily populated by other researchers"

In accordance with this, Salager-Meyer (1994: 153) defines hedges as "the product of a mental attitude," which embraces a three-dimension concept: "purposive fuzziness and vagueness as a threat-minimizing strategy; the author's modesty or unwillingness of reaching absolute accuracy and of quantifying all the phenomena under observation". When a writer is excessively assertive then he or she becomes vulnerable to attack. Therefore, writers may need to present themselves as "the humble servants of the discipline" (Myers, 1989: 5).

Since hedges significantly contribute to a more reader friendly text in that they provide negotiation between the writer and the reader. Writers need to learn what kinds of assertion should be hedged, e.g. criticism of others' works, which should be strengthened by means of appropriate linguistic tools (Lewin, 2005).

Connectedness

Given the recent focus on the interaction between the reader and the text, connectedness has been argued to be necessary for ease of processing and specifically requires considerable attention to L2 writing. Enkvist (1978: 126; cited in Connor and Johns, 1999: 1) wrote:

> *If a text is to be well formed, it must have semantic coherence as well as sufficient signals of surface cohesion to enable the reader to capture the coherence… the general rule is that every sentence of a well formed text must have a cross-reference to at least one other sentence of that text, and there has to be an overall coherence involving the text as a whole.*

Connectedness refers to the link and flow both explicit and implicit in a text which makes it a unified whole. Connectedness, in other words, embodies in two-dimension textual surface, which underlines explicit links and a consistent world picture which is summarizable and interpretable, indicating implicit links. This term is usually divided into cohesion and coherence.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the connectivity of ideas in discourse and holding sentences together in a text thus prompts the flow of information in a unified way. Halliday and Hasan

(1976; cited in Hinkel, 2004) propose that grammatical and lexical cohesive devices such as reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion create ''texture''– the property of being a text. These cohesive devices ultimately contribute to the coherence of the text**.** The descriptions of a text quality, however are established in abstract terms and it is not quite easy to define text clarity, cohesion or effectiveness with any degree of precision, particularly considering L2 writers these imprecise terms acquire an entirely new meaning (Hinkel, 2004).

Many studies determined what syntactic and lexical constructions are employed in writing and text clarity, cohesion and communicative effectiveness (Lee, 2002; Thompson, 1994; Todd et al., 2004). To examine cohesion in a text, literature underlines two main approaches, first of which is the taxonomy of cohesive devices of Halliday and Hassan (1976 ; cited in Llach and Catalan, 2005).

Coherence

Coherence and cohesion are intertwined but by no means synonym. Unlike cohesion, coherence is less tangible ways of connecting discourse in writer's interpretation rather than in the text itself (Yule, 1996). Though the concept of coherence is often considered abstract and fuzzy through certain aspects, Widdowson's (1978, cited in Wikborg, 1990) description appears to be most helpful. According to him, a text is coherent when a reader understands the functions of each following unit of a text without any violation of meaning. However, it is problematic and difficult to teach and learn coherence for not only in L2 but L1 writers as well:

> *Although most teachers consider coherence an essential element of good writing, it remains difficult to teach, teachers acclaim its benefits, demonstrate its effects, and exemplify good models, but students still do not know how to write coherently (Cerneglia, Medsker& Connor, 1990: 229).*

Most handbooks and textbooks agree that coherent texts have clear and smooth links amongst sentences and paragraphs. Mantague, Munsford and Emig (1985; cited in Cerneglia, Medsker& Connor, 1990: 229) assert that coherence is a matter of putting the selected material in the right order with the right connectives (p.94). Though many other definitions and similar explanations can be made, it might be too abstract for concrete application and be an obstacle for inexperienced writer to achieve it.

Since the notion of coherence is rather abstract due to embedded phrases in it such as "well organized", "logical sequencing", or "a clear progression of ideas well-linked (Hughes, 2003: 102)" compared to cohesion, it causes subjective interpretations and jeopardizes objective evaluation of coherence in a text which may lead unreliability as for the writing assessment. For instance, the features alluded to whether a text is well organized or not may not provide objective interpretations and may cause some confusion and vagueness. However, with cohesion, it is possible to point to certain instruments providing cohesion in a text; therefore it is relatively objective quality of discourse.

Conclusion

As English uninterruptedly expands as the leading language for dissemination of academic knowledge, the question of writing effectively and in expected ways causes considerable challenges to students requiring graduates to learn to master and so as to succeed in the academia. Focusing on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts, English for academic purposes, takes on an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This leads students

to be equipped with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts.

At language level, the enhanced awareness of scholarly writing leads novice writers to selections at the appropriate degree and phase. To achieve this awareness, explicit academic writing instruction both in L1 and L2 from early periods of education life should be integrated. Explicit academic writing instruction, through student-center exploration, and a curriculum that is based on the strategies in which non-native speakers can describe, notice and broadly employ the characteristics of discipline specific writing. In this context, academic writing instructor can undertake a role of guidance. In addition to this, academic writing centres will assist inexperinced writers and students in terms of writing style and conventions through their written products. Therefore, universities can found writing centres with professional personnels and allocate adequate budget to benefit from good writers and technological facilities in the field of academic writing.

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