

English for Academic Purposes (EAP): New frontiers in learning to write in English

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1. Aims¹

Writing is not simply an act of juxtaposing words on a page and producing grammatically correct sentences. “Writing as a text is hard to separate from writing as process or writing as communicative purpose” (Breeze, 2012, p. 2). Every written composition is connected to a set of conventions and intentions, which are situated in a context of interpersonal, social, cultural, occupational and disciplinary practices. Writing may be regulated by socially prescribed norms as it may be a means of personal expression used by writers to show their agency and their creativity (Breeze, 2012, p. 2). At university level, writing stimulates thought and knowledge construction – it is a “stimulus to the mental faculties, to the logical talent, to originality, to the power of illustration, to the arrangement of topics, second to none” (Newman, 1855, p. 319).

One of the main issues with academic writing is the misunderstanding around its ontology – “what academic writing is” – and its epistemology “what it does” (Molinari, 2022, p. 18). In many schoolbooks (see, for example, Bailey, 2006), academic writing is associated to the characteristic features of formality, objectivity and impersonality. In other textbooks², it is described as a practice that enables writers to transform knowledge. Each ontological classification is the outcome of an epistemological finding and has pedagogical implications. For example, if a teacher defines academic writing as “impersonal,” they are likely to teach students texts with impersonal features, such as the passive voice. On the other hand, if a teacher considers academic writing as a “transformative practice,” they will teach their students several methods of reconfiguring and transforming knowledge (Molinari, 2022, p. 18). Indeed, there is not a standard academic text, but there are several kinds of “academic writings” with different purposes.

Another problematic issue with the framing of academic writing is its classification as either a “skill” (Hyland, 2006, p. 17) or as a “social practice” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). On the one hand, a skill is conceived as the mechanical ability to know how to do something – for instance, knowing how to use grammar or how to spell a word regardless of the circumstances. As such, a skill is transferable to several contexts and corresponds to the technical knowledge of rules and techniques. On the other hand, a social practice is knowing that something is appropriate – for instance, knowing that the meaning of words is context-dependent or knowing that the use of the passive is inappropriate in certain texts. Unlike skills, social practices are less easily transferable since they vary according to the social context (Molinari, 2022, p. 20). Social practices correspond to practical knowledge which is the ability to “discern, judge and perform [...] acquired by living within the organised social world” (Hirst, 1998, p. 152).

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² As an example of the textbooks that describe academic writing as a practice that enables writers to transform knowledge, see Lillis et al. (2015).

The skill-practice dichotomy influences the way in which academic writing is experienced, taught, discussed, and written about. Historically, Anglo-American instructors have adopted skills-based approaches based upon a technical and atomistic perception of academic writing. In this perspective, academic writing is understood as a set of transferable skills to be explained and acquired in isolated, transitory, and temporary ways without a specific purpose and independently of a specific discipline. As a result, students are required to learn sets of linguistic and textual items, such as lists of academic terms³ or prescriptive rules on the structure of paragraphs⁴. In contrast, advocates of social practice approaches have a more complex, holistic, and reflective idea of literacy (Molinari, 2022, pp. 22-24). They see academic writing as a practice, that is, as an activity involving reflection and thought, social interaction, and a sense of purpose that changes according to the context and the writer's will. Since every practice involves standards of excellence, which the individual must accept and to use as a yardstick for their own performance (Fitzmaurice, 2010, p. 47), writers must understand the standards of excellence that are internal to the practice of academic writing. In this respect, it must be underlined that the standards of excellence vary within higher education institutions in that every community of scholars determines what counts as "good" writing in their discipline (Molinari, 2022, p. 27).

Although skills-based and social practice approaches attempt to give a definition of academic writing and of its attendant pedagogies, their reductive nature has problematic implications. By highlighting the formal features – grammar, lexis and genre – of academic texts, skills-based writing pedagogies enhance a "culture of performativity" (Macfarlane, 2021) in which language is superior to content. Moreover, by isolating the textual and linguistic features of academic texts from their social context, skills-based approaches overlook significant academic practices such as developing an "academic voice" (see Elbow, 1994; Matsuda & Tardy, 2008) or acquiring awareness of the text's readership/audience (Richardson, 1990). Alternatively, by stigmatising the prescriptions and conventions of skills-based approaches, pedagogies related to writing as a social practice acknowledge the multiple and diverse nature of academic writing and are accused of relativising all forms of writing. Allowing "anything to count as 'academic'" (Molinari, 2022, p. 99), these approaches neglect the existence of an appropriate academic language and style and favour the subjectivity of the author to the detriment of socially just and objective knowledge. Indeed, at the heart of the debate on practice approaches is the issue of what constitutes standards of excellence, internal or external, in academic writing. Another debated topic is tension between agency – academic writers' possibility of defining the skills that are internal to the practice of academic writing – and "structure" – the standards of excellence of academic writing imposed by the higher education institution. These debates usually develop around specific syntactic features – such as the use of the passive or active voice or the use of the first-person pronoun – which may be regarded as inherent or extrinsic properties of academic writing (Molinari, 2022, pp. 29-31).

In *Perspectives on Academic Writing in European Higher Education: Genres, Practices, and Competences*, Otto Kruse (2013, pp. 50-52) proposes an analysis of academic writing which appears to synthesise the principles of the skills-based and social practice approaches. The author does not consider academic writing as an isolated skill to be acquired and practised invariantly. Instead, he sees academic writing as an activity, or set of complex skills, which is integrated in a range of neighbouring competences that may be summarised as follows:

- 1) "Connections to disciplinary knowledge": academic writing must be related to disciplinary knowledge (cf. social practice approaches) for content to be generated. Although subject matter expertise is not intrinsic to writing competence, it can be considered as a "prerequisite for writing," but also as the outcome of it. Students create knowledge by writing and simultaneously learn disciplinary knowledge by researching and summarising it (Kruse, 2013, p. 51).
- 2) "Connections to process and procedural skills": like disciplinary knowledge, "process competence" is not only a necessary condition for academic writing, but also the result of it. Writers learn the steps – such as idea generation, planning, revision etc. – and the recursive nature of the writing process under the support of academic writing instructors and develop process competence concurrently, as they write (Kruse 2013, p. 51).
- 3) "Connections to communication and discourse knowledge": academic texts require knowledge of the discourse practices, the citation styles (see Hyland, 2000) and the authorial voice (see Nelson &

³ As an example of the works that deal with academic terms, see Coxhead (2011).

⁴ As an example of the works that provide prescriptive rules on the structure of paragraphs in academic writing, see Bailey (2006).

Castelló, 2012) which characterise the “discursive community” (cf. social practice approaches) they are directed to.

- 4) “Connections to media use”: with the advent of new literacies, academic writing requires writers to participate in an innovative “global community” (see Coiro et al., 2008; Leu et al., 2007;) where they must learn to handle the new media used to create, transmit, discuss, deliver, and publish a text.
- 5) “Connections to genre knowledge”: genre understanding (see Hyland, 2003; Swales, 1990) or genre awareness (see Devitt, 2009) are fundamental competences for academic writers, who must know what textual features characterise certain contextual purposes (cf. social practice approaches). Genres regulate all writing processes in the academia and writers must be aware of the genres that characterise their academic community in order to be socialised into it (Kruse, 2013, p. 52).
- 6) “Connections to linguistic skills”: as skills-based approaches suggest, academic writing competence can also be measured on the level of language proficiency: from the use of basic linguistic skills – such as spelling, grammar and syntax – to the use of rhetorical means – such as metadiscourse, hedging, intertextuality, and self-reference (see Kruse & Chitez, p. 2012).

The competence model shows that academic writing “is an integrative activity” (Kruse, 2013, p. 50) that intertwines with a series of complex skills. It develops “in multidimensional and nonlinear ways” (Rogers 2010, p. 374) only if all its related competences evolve and improve concurrently, and its progress relies on a considerable number of factors – such as student engagement, classroom practices etc. As a result, academic writing pedagogies should propose teaching models that measure writers’ skills and purposes against the overall goals of higher education (Kruse, 2013, p. 52).

As Bourdieu *et al.* observe, “academic language is [...] no one’s mother tongue” (1995, p. 4) and “neither is the special register required in the different subjects” (Golden & Kulbrandstad, 2021, p. 4). If both must be learned and assimilated also by students who speak English as their first language, for students with a different L1, the challenges of academic writing in English as a second language are even greater. Not only must they learn to operate within specific registers of the English language, but they must also conform to the writing norms of the discipline or of the place they are involved in, especially if they are international students pursuing an academic qualification in English in the West (Zhang, 2021, p. 147). In sum, non-native speakers of English encounter three major problems when faced with academic writing: firstly, the “intellectual demands” of the academia (i.e. the problem of conducting research; being able to paraphrase/synthesise; using referencing systems); secondly the “linguistic hurdles” (i.e. mastering academic English: writing elaborate structured texts; using formal register, objective style, fluency, accuracy, complexity) (Breeze, 2012, p. 8); thirdly distinguishing between the “differences in rhetorical traditions” (research in contrastive rhetoric has shown that there are different writing conventions not only between the Global North and South, and the Global West and East, but also within the Western world) (Golden & Kulbrandstad, 2021, p. 4; Zhang, 2021, p. 155).

It is these three areas of difficulty – intellectual demands, linguistic hurdles, and differences in rhetorical traditions – that this special edition of E-JournALL will address. In the attempt to promote the idea that “students need specific instruction and guidance if they are to learn to write effectively for academic purposes” (Breeze, 2012, p.8), this volume will feature six contributions by professors and researchers whose experience in teaching English writing has been invaluable. Each has been grouped according to one of the three areas of difficulty described above, and their works will offer cutting-edge insight into research-based English writing pedagogies. In light of the burgeoning use of *English for Specific Academic Purposes* (ESAP) and *English for Scientific and Professional Purposes* (ESPP) (see Zanola, 2023), and by offering new perspectives on how to manage the teaching of writing English, this volume aims to contribute to answer to the concerted need to give more time and space to the progenitor of all these varieties, *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP).

2. Contributions⁵

The intellectual demands needed when approaching a writing task are at the heart of both Sharon Hartle’s and Andrea Nava’s contributions. Hartle describes the results of an investigation into a small corpus of C2 level academic writing consisting of the sub-genres of summary and discussion learner language. Her study reveals that one problematic key area is collocation, reinforcing the idea that although EAP teaching often focuses on specialized lexis, this may actually be the area where academic writers need least help. What may

⁵ This section was written by Annalisa Zanola.

cause considerable difficulty, on the other hand, is lexical usage. The author therefore also discusses how this investigation informed the classroom implementation of data-driven learning (DDL) to increase learner awareness of and ability to use collocations effectively in written academic English. Nava investigates the “pre-history” of teaching L2 English academic writing – when writing instruction targeted “composition writing” – through a case study of the Italian context. First, the author illustrates how English writing materials produced in Italy were few and far between until the end of the 20th century, and often published by small specialist publishers; then, he scrutinizes four such materials published between the 1940s and the 1990s in order to analyze the evolution of L2 English writing instruction. The findings of the analysis show that, in the face of a stagnant institutional context, there was indeed an evolution in writing conceptions and writing pedagogy in Italy throughout the 20th century, which was to herald developments in L2 English writing for academic purposes at the beginning of the 21st century.

As an example of the linguistic hurdles that L2 speakers encounter when writing for academic purposes, Tolulope Akinseye’s essay draws attention to the metadiscourse used by newly admitted undergraduate students in Nigeria. Akinseye carries out a mixed-methods study of the use of interactive resources as discursive strategies in enhancing the academic writing skills of ESL undergraduate students in Nigeria. Using a sample of 100 expository essays, the author presents a qualitative analysis of the types and usages of discursive strategies employed, as well as a quantitative analysis of the frequency of occurrence of these strategies. The results reveal that transitional markers, frame markers, and code glosses were the most frequently used interactive markers in the academic writing produced by the non-native undergraduate students, while evidential and endophoric markers were used less frequently. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating interactive resources in the teaching of academic writing skills to undergraduate students in an English Second Language (ESL) context, so that students develop the ability to produce more coherent, organized, and persuasive academic writing that meets the expectations of academic writing in an ESL context.

The linguistic hurdles in the field of legal English education are the focus Giulia Pennisi’s essay. She investigates how textbooks for English Academic and Legal Purposes (EALP) have responded to the challenges of law school education, including the fact that the legal profession is in a state of flux and that there seems to be increasing interest of law schools and academia in the communicative events that students will need to engage in. This poses a pedagogical challenge in terms of course structures, types of curricula, and content of the materials and textbooks provided for law students. Building on a solid review of previous pedagogic contributions, the paper begins diachronically with a sample of EALP-type textbooks. The analysis of the nature of the typology that constitutes the structure of contemporary EALP textbooks allows the author to provide some insights into the development of EALP-type textbooks and their response to the challenges of legal English education.

Roxanne Barbara Doerr’s concern for the intellectual- and linguistic-based difficulties of academic writing are intertwined in an essay where underexplored areas of EAP research and practice are examined in the blurred domain of “academic style.” The author presents a pilot study consisting in the detailed qualitative analysis of a collection of abstracts from a PhD seminar on academic style (self)proofreading. By employing a methodological framework combining stylistics, error analysis, and the categorization of specific “areas of interest,” the pilot study highlights relevant stylistic errors in academic writing. This analysis allows the author to draw conclusions on the requirements and implications of introducing academic style to EAP, calling for the expansion and customization of EAP courses and specialized seminars based on the needs of the class and individuals. These would benefit from the insights of teachers, instructors, and language professionals and reviewers actively engaged in the academic editorial community.

Finally, the problems involved in writing that arise from differences in rhetorical traditions feature in Simona Agata Giuffrida and Annalisa Bonomo’s essay, which argues for the use of English travel narratives and their interlingual translations as vehicles to foster intercultural sensitivity and language awareness in the EAP classroom. The author performs a comparative analysis of Daphne Phelps’s British travel narrative *A House in Sicily* (1999) and its Italian translation *Una casa in Sicilia* (2001) to show how travel writing (also in translation) may be an opportunity for a reappraisal of what literature may have to offer in the EAP context, especially in terms of culture-specific language variability.

The selected papers demonstrate the urgency, but also the subtlety, of engaging with a field as complex as EAP, which is increasingly striving for homogeneity and standardization in academic writing. This area of research is further highlighted in Carlotta Fiammenghi’s review of Annalisa Zanola’s recent volume on *English for Scientific and Professional Purposes* (Carocci 2023), which focuses on language and communication for

academic and professional purposes. Written academic communication has become an important element in identity building, in strengthening peer interaction in scientific research, and in lending persuasiveness to the dissemination of knowledge. This ties in with another key concept behind the design of this volume, namely the existence of international and/or professional communities whose use of English is essential for the acquisition, transmission, and dissemination of knowledge and the improvement of practice. The following pages are intended to provide the reader with a comprehensive and exhaustive perspective on how to approach EAP in an efficient and effective manner that meets the increasingly sophisticated needs of the academic, scientific, and professional communication world.

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