



*A systematic approach toward the notion and features of
Academic English in higher education programmes*

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Abstract ;

Academic English refers to a variety or a register of English that is used in professional books and it is distinguished from General English by the specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines. Academic English tasks involve reading abstracts, getting down the key ideas from academic lectures and also producing academic piece of writing such as critiques, summaries, reports, research projects or expository essays. The present article attempts to provide a multidimensional conceptual framework toward the notion of Academic English in higher education programmes. It also features the similarities and differences between Academic and General English in order to highlight the role of both types of English in language teaching practices. Furthermore, it describes the features and basic dimensions that Academic English should possess based on a theoretical model of academic literacy that is proposed by Kern (2000). The main conclusion is that the objectives of teaching Academic English should be diverse, including, apart from linguistic competence development, other subcompetences equally important to the process of learning English for Academic Purposes such as the sociocultural, strategic and metalinguistic competences.

Article info

Received

17 July 2023

Accepted

12 August 2023

Keyword:

- ✓ Academic
- ✓ English, General
- ✓ English,
- ✓ academic disciplines,
- ✓ components of Academic English,
- ✓ English language competence development

1. Introduction

Academic English (A.E.) refers to a specific variety of English that we use in order to read, write and study in an academic context. A.E. typically has its own style, tone, vocabulary and structure than differentiates it from General English. Within this context, English for Academic Purposes, or E.A.P., refers to learning English in order to study a specific scientific domain. Academic English modules in higher education programmes concentrate on certain skills that learners will need to develop so that they can use English for academic studies and research. This is actually a branch of E.S.P. (English for Specific Purposes) that has expanded together with the growing number of international students undertaking higher education in English.

2. The notion of A.E.

In this unit we will quote some definitions of A.E. in order to determine and clarify the multifunctional nature of A.E.

a. Academic English ...often considered relatively formal complex English that conveys ideas in a precise and objective manner. It is generally acknowledged to include the essential skills of literary analysis, the observance of reference systems, the synthesis of associated scholars and the ability of critical evaluation. Essential academic vocabulary, phrases and grammatical complexity are often used traditionally in academic dialogue and text. Specifically, Academic English refers to words and practice that are not necessarily common

or frequently encountered in informal conversation and circumstances. (Wilson, 2016)

b. Academic English is the type of English you need for reading and understanding your study materials and writing about your subject. (The Open University, 2017).

c. Academic writing in English is linear, which means it has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without digressions or repetitions. Its objective is to inform rather than entertain. As well as this it is in the standard written form of the language. There are ten main features of academic writing that are often discussed. Academic writing is to some extent: complex, formal, objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible. It uses language precisely and accurately. It is also well organised and planned. (Using English for Academic Purposes, UEFAP, 2014).

d. Academic English also called English for Academic Purposes (EAP) entails training students, usually in a higher education setting, to use language appropriately for study. It is one of the most common forms of English for specific purposes (Wikipedia, 2017).

e. Effective Academic English depends on producing the most appropriate style for your purpose and audience. It includes consistency, the right level of formality, expressing ideas precisely, being concise and objective (Manchester University, 2017).

f. Academic Language (American English for Academic English) refers to the oral, written, auditory, and visual language proficiency required to learn effectively in

universities and academic programs. i.e., it's the language used in lectures, seminars, books, and journals. It's the language that students are expected to learn and achieve fluency in (Education Glossary, 2017).

g. Academic Language is the language needed by students to do the work in universities. It includes, for example, discipline-specific vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, and applications of rhetorical conventions and devices that are typical for a content area (e.g., essays, lab reports, discussions of a controversial issue) (Csun, 2017).

h. Academic Language is the language needed by students to understand and communicate in the academic disciplines. Academic language includes such things as specialized vocabulary, conventional text structures within a field such as essays and lab reports and other language-related activities typical of classrooms, such as expressing disagreement, discussing an issue, or asking for clarification. Academic language includes both productive and receptive modalities (Central Washington University, CWU, 2017).

3. The distinction between Academic and General English

Academic English can be viewed as Formal English whereas the characterization Informal/Basic/Social English is appropriate in defining General English. For example, if a learner needs English only for communicative purposes in his or her social life, he is advised to learn General English. Whereas, for the purpose of studying in an academic context the learner has to develop

Academic English. However, Kitkauskiene (2006) asserts that in both cases the learner is required to learn General English since Academic English is based on the knowledge of General English which means that both types are not be opposed to each other. Similarly, Charles and Pecorary (2016) analyze the vocabulary of academic texts and essays and come to the conclusion that the distinction between Academic and General English is not distinct.

A major similarity between Academic and General English is that both can develop one's ability to communicate in oral or written form and that their adjacent elements are not perceptibly different which makes up a continuum between them. Kitkauskiene (2006: 89) observes: "In both cases linguistic knowledge includes the correctness of grammatical structures, proper choice of words and precision of their meaning".

However, there are some main differences between Academic and General English. More specifically, Academic English bears the following characteristics: it is more formal, more objective and it possesses advanced grammar structures. More complex usage of grammar is commonly met in academic texts and, according to Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999) frequent utilization of present and past tenses along with other specifications makes academic writing genres differ from general genres. Another significant difference is that General English is mostly taught at school while Academic English is taught in higher education. Within this context, teaching English can take two different

forms: *English for General Purposes (E.G.P.) and English for Academic Purposes (E.A.P.)*. Also, for Widdowson (Ajideh, 2009) the difference between E.A.P. and E.G.P. lies in the way we define and implement learning purposes. It should also be stressed that although extensive literature focuses on English for special purposes (Adamson, 1990; Dudley-Evans, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Johns & Dudley Evans, 1991) and academic discourse and literacy (Belcher & Braine, 1995; Bizzell, 1992; Elbow, 1991; Flowerdew, 2002), this literature focuses mainly on university learners rather than on school children. Indeed, according to Baker (2001), Academic English has not been given enough attention in elementary and secondary schools. The growing literature on teaching English in the content areas (Brinton & Master, 1997; Crandall, Dale, Rhodes, & Spanos, 1989; Genesee, 1994) has often focused on techniques rather than on the acquisition of academic English.

On the whole, Academic and General English are closely interrelated to each other since there are only a few academic text-specific words, and what makes them unique is their frequency of occurrence with some words occurring more frequently in an academic context than in a general one. Gardner and Davies (2014) declare that just over 14% of the terms in high academic writing come from this core academic lexicon. Therefore, achievement in A.E. is quite impossible without a broad understanding of general English.

Academic English is different from other types of English having features that can be summarised as follows:

- it uses formal academic language and avoids colloquialisms
- it is usually written in the third person and often uses impersonal structures
- it is objective and impartial
- it often uses the passive voice
- it is tentative and cautious
- there are lots of references to other writers
- the texts are well-structured
- there are well developed paragraphs which often start with a strong topic sentence
- there are linking words which give the text cohesion

To sum up, Academic English has more strict rules than general English. Raising awareness of the distinction between A.E. and G.E. is critically important as an E.A.P. teacher is responsible for performing certain roles such as a course designer, researcher, evaluator along with the role of a language teacher.

4. Components of A.E.

Academic English includes many diverse sub-registers that are related to various disciplines such as science, economics and mathematics (Johns, 1997). Halliday & Martin (1993) observe that it is not possible to “do” science, “do” economics or “do” mathematics with only ordinary language which means that one must “do” discipline-specific work with academic and discipline-specific language.

A.E. entails multiple inter-related dimensions and components. The framework described in this paper is

based on a theoretical model of academic literacy proposed by Kern (2000). He describes three different dimensions: the linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural/psychological dimension stressing the importance of all three different perspectives since language practices are always embedded in social and cultural practices. To quote Kern (2000: 34): “From a sociocultural perspective, reading and writing are communicative acts in which readers and writers position one another in particular ways, drawing on conventions and resources provided by the culture”

1. The Linguistic Dimension of Academic English: within each skill (reading, writing, speaking and listening) learners must develop proficiency in diverse, often overlapping linguistic components. The Linguistic Dimension includes the phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic and discourse component.

1a. The phonological component: it entails knowledge of the phonological features of A.E. such as stress, intonation and sound patterns.

1b. The Lexical Component: it entails knowledge of the forms and meanings of words that are used across academic disciplines (as well as in everyday situations outside of academic settings); it also entails knowledge of the ways academic words are formed with the uses of prefixes, roots and suffixes, the parts of speech of academic words, as well as the grammatical constraints that determine academic words.

1c. The Grammatical Component: it enables learners to use the grammatical features (morphological and syntactic)

associated with argumentative composition, procedural description and analytical writing and also knowledge of the grammatical co-occurrence restrictions governing words.

1d. The Sociolinguistic Component: it entails knowledge of an increased number of language functions such as general functions of ordinary English (apologizing, complaining or making requests) as well as functions common to all academic fields.

1e. The Discourse Component: it entails knowledge of the course features used in specific academic genres including devices and other organizational signals that help readers to understand implications in what is read, follow logical lines of thought and provide smooth transitions from one conceptual idea to another.

2. The Cognitive Dimension: it minimally consists of the Knowledge Component, the Higher order thinking Component, the Strategic and the Metalinguistic Awareness Component.

2a. The Knowledge Component: it includes Knowledge either declarative: knowing that or procedural: knowing how of the world. Students who study A.E. should acquire extensive knowledge of the world that is primarily built upon their previous reading. They should also learn to accumulate ideas, concepts, definitions, and stories that they can draw upon to make sense of text and explain themselves.

2b. Higher order thinking Component: it involves developing the ability to interpret, evaluate and synthesize the claims and citations in reading. Readers must determine the credibility of the

sources cited in the texts. For instance, they cannot overlook the contribution of cartoons, illustrations, graphs, or charts in the process of reading and interpretation of a text. They must also be able to relate the readings to the realities of specific disciplines, whether political, social or scientific. In addition, they must be able to distinguish fact from skewed opinion that will help them read academic texts critically. Spack (1984) asserts that without strong proficiency in academic English, the learners' ability to interpret and analyze their reading is compromised.

2.c. *The Strategic Component*: it includes those strategies that may be called into action either to enhance the effectiveness of communication or to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting factors in actual communication or to insufficient competence (Swain, 1989). Strategies can also include "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing L2 skills" (Oxford, 1993: 18). These strategies help students attend to information, organize their study of English, monitor their errors and assess their progress. Strategies are intentionally used and consciously controlled by the learner (Pressley, 1995: 28); they are "actions that learners select and control to achieve desired goals and objectives" (Winograd & Hare, 1988: 123).

2.d. *The Metalinguistic Awareness Component*: their metalinguistic awareness involves their ability to think about language use and plays a significant role in everyday English.

3. *The Sociocultural/Psychological Dimension*: learners must develop more than the linguistic and cognitive dimension of A.E. More specifically, they must acquire knowledge of sociocultural and psychological features such as the social and cultural norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, motivations and habits. Academic English arises not just from knowledge of the linguistic code and cognition, but also from social practices in which A.E. is used in order to accomplish communicative goals.

Conclusion

The present papers aims at promoting informed dialogue to practitioners and researchers that will stimulate further investigation in the field of A.E. since research on the development of academic literacy is in its infancy. To this end, it elaborates on the notion of A.E. and its uses on an academic context. It specifically concentrates on its features and components based on Kern's theoretical model. Furthermore, it focuses on the distinction between A.E and G.E. by stressing both their similarities and differences in order to determine their interrelationship and contribution toward language competences development. The main conclusion is that the objectives of teaching A.E. should be multidimensional aiming at developing, apart from the linguistic competence, subcompetences such as the strategic, sociocultural, metalinguistic and cognitive that play significant role toward English language acquisition for academic purposes.

Additional research should explore the limitations of the proposed conceptual framework and consider the ways it could

be improved. For instance, it could focus on the extent to which the various dimensions should be emphasized in different study levels (undergraduate-postgraduate) and on learners of different proficiency levels. In terms of student assessment methods, the framework suggests the need for reliable, valid measurements of A.E. that would systematically test the key features and basic components of A.E. that learners face difficulties in acquiring. It would also be significant to explore assessment methods that could provide learners with constructive information in order to advance their language learning rather than provide students with limited information about their English language development that would demotivate them from further learning. Finally, what is proposed is a systematic design of teacher professional development programs that would provide them with the knowledge base required in order to teach efficiently the multidimensional notion of A.E. and reach the best learning outcomes.

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