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CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ACADEMIC ENGLISH

With the more vivid collaboration between different countries in the fields of education and science the concept of academic language has become a common one, being especially widely used in English language teaching and examining practices. For example, there have been introduced new versions of some international English language tests, such as IELTS Academic and PTE Academic, aimed at the foreigners applying for degree level courses, or positions at professional organizations. In fact, the Oxford Advanced learner's dictionary defines English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as the course intended for people "who are using English for study, but whose first language is not English" [7, p. 504]. So, what does learning academic language actually involve?

The EAP learners are greatly interested in gaining the oral, written, auditory, and visual language proficiency that would allow them to function effectively in an English-speaking academic environment, and thus obtain education and employment abroad [3]. In other words, they need to learn English used at the university level and beyond (e.g. in classroom lessons, textbooks, lectures, tests and other assignments, in professional journal articles, conference papers and discussions, seminars, debates, reports etc.). It certainly displays differences in vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, syntax, and rhetorical conventions from "conversational" or everyday English, but as seen from today's numerous EAP coursebooks (*Cambridge Academic English*, *Collins' Academic Skills Series*, *Oxford EAP*) these differences are just a few aspects of the language that one should be aware of rather than irregularities that are too complex to grasp.

Contrary to many beliefs, academic vocabulary does not consist of subject-specific terms only [4; 6]. As a matter of fact, in addition to high frequency non-academic words encountered in a variety of contexts, and specialized or technical content-area words, EAP materials include core and academic language which is

generic to any discipline (e.g. *analysis, argument, hypothesis, significant, in terms of, based on, consider, suggest* etc.).

A number of studies investigating the academic vocabulary of English have resulted in academic word lists and easy-to-use software tools capable of identifying frequent academic words in any kind of text, so that both EAP teachers and learners are able to focus on those words when they are used across academic disciplines, or in everyday settings (see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/alzsh3/acvocab/index.htm>, for example). The more important thing, however, is to know how to learn about the forms and meanings of those words when analyzing different pieces of academic discourse.

Among the effective strategies of dealing with academic vocabulary one can find contextual guessing, recognizing multiple derivational affixes, “word-mapping”, and placing words into phrases. Contextual guessing means inferring meaning clues from the context, such as the part of speech of the word in question, its collocations and various forms it can take. Knowing typical prefixes, roots, and suffixes (*-able, -er, -sh, -ly, non-, un-,* etc.) will also help identify the parts of speech of academic words and their grammatical constraints. Word-mapping lies in relating words through associations and grouping them accordingly, say, by topics, synonyms, functions etc. Finally, phrases are useful for memorizing collocations, metadiscourse markers, and functional words. It is obvious that dictionary skills are essential for applying the above strategies in practice.

The grammar of academic English, although being part of the language itself, is typically characterised by a number of specific features [2; 8; 10], namely:

- very few number of personal pronouns and more frequent use of the passive, including the passive with reporting verbs in subjective infinitive constructions;
- high density of noun phrases, with verb-noun ratio being roughly 1:4 [1];
- a wide range of noun modifiers, such as adjectives, nouns, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, infinitive clauses, *-ing* clauses;
- the variety of cohesive devices and sentence structures determined by the subject discipline and communicative context;
- more complex punctuation and syntax;
- a tendency to avoid contractions and phrasal verbs;
- hedging language (modal verbs expressing probability; verbs *appear, seem, look, tend, suggest, indicate, estimate*, adverbs *apparently, arguably, reasonably, typically, slightly, fairly, quite, rather, normally, possibly, probably, (un)likely* etc).

The best approach to teaching EAP grammar is to raise awareness of the features under consideration by analyzing authentic pieces of academic discourse and practise using clause structures, noun phrases, and word forms appropriately (i.e. correctly in terms of both grammar and register) for stating facts and opinions, arguing and persuading, describing processes, giving definitions, talking about cause and effect, as well as comparing and contrasting within the scope of various subject disciplines.

As for EAP rhetorical conventions, they are of particular importance as they differ from one language community to another, and require the knowledge of social practices involved in academic settings [10]. This sociolinguistic component of academic language primarily comprises a number of language functions, such as apologizing, complaining, making requests and some others, which are common to all academic fields. It also suggests learning about registers and specific academic genres (essays, presentations, research papers, cases studies, projects, summaries, to name a few) as well as transitions and other organizational signals that provide logical lines of thought both in speaking and writing.

More recent research has extended the linguistic and socio-cultural dimensions of EAP by adding a cognitive component, which basically means higher-order thinking, and relies upon the ability to interpret specialist texts, to analyze situations, to think critically, to evaluate information, to predict, infer and synthesize meanings, to use quotations and references so that to avoid plagiarism etc [9].

In general, the competency in academic language includes

- basic academic skills: organizational, planning and time management skills (e.g. to establish priorities and meet the deadlines), research skills (esp. to find relevant information, to assess the credibility of sources, to effectively take notes and summarize the findings);
- cognitive skills: critical thinking skills (e.g. to generate new ideas, to make objective judgements etc.), problem-solving skills (to define the problem, to evaluate alternatives, to propose and implement solutions, to determine the possible outcomes etc.);
- learning modes (questioning, discussing, observing, developing hypotheses, theorizing, experimenting, reviewing, presenting, working in groups);
- work habits (persistence, self-discipline, curiosity, responsibility);
- technological literacy, advanced computer skills, or 21st century skills.

It follows that academic English is concerned with skills development and thus emphasizes the context where learning takes place [9; 10]. It includes multiple, dynamic, and inter-related dimensions: linguistic features of grammar, vocabulary and discourse patterns, social and cultural factors that affect linguistic choices, and a variety of non-linguistic skills that are inevitable for achieving success in schools, completion of higher education, employment and further professional advancement.

As the statistics indicate, the number of EAP learners is going to increase due to three major developments: the changes in university policies that enable students to apply for courses at foreign higher educational institutions, the increased attention to teaching and learning by funding bodies, which leads to a greater competition between international training programs, and the current status of English as the international language of research, scholarship and academic publishing [5, p. 3-5].

Therefore, it is extremely important for practitioners and researchers to carry on exploration of academic literacy, and design adequate EAP instruction materials that include a consideration of the three dimensions of academic English.

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