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EFL Academic writing: What should Dutch business communication students learn?

Frank van Meurs, Berna Hendriks, Brigitte Planken, Sandy Barasa, Elizabeth de Groot, Ulrike Nederstigt

Abstract

Many Dutch university students are expected to read and write academic research papers in English. In this article, we discuss a number of areas of EFL academic writing that are relevant for first-year Dutch business communication students. These students need to become familiar with quantitative research in the field of international business communication (corpus analyses, experiments, surveys) and with the English conventions for reporting such research. The relevant areas of EFL academic writing include the conventions of empirical research articles and research posters in terms of structure, phrasing, tense use, expressing caution, and referencing. We will illustrate our discussion with examples of exercises from a course we have designed to enable students to practise their skills in the various areas. We also present the results of a survey among our students regarding their experience of the course and student exam scores showing how well they have mastered various aspects of academic writing discussed in the course.

Introduction

A number of Master and Bachelor programmes at Dutch universities are now taught in English (Brenn-White & Van Rest, 2012; Leest & Wierda-Boer, 2011). As a result, many Dutch university students are expected to be able to read and write academic research papers in English. Communication and Information Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen is an example of a Bachelor programme where this is the case for a substantial number of courses. The research courses in this programme mainly focus on quantitative research, analyses of text corpora, experiments testing the effects of manipulated text variables, and surveys investigating the communication behaviour of people in organisations. From the first year on, our students therefore need to be familiarized with such quantitative research and with the English conventions for reporting such research.

Scholars and researchers in the area of academic writing in English as a foreign language have stressed that learners need to become familiar with the discourse conventions of established academic genres (e.g. Flowerdew, 2000; Swales, 1990). These conventions relate to structure (the structure of a paper as a whole, e.g. IMRD (Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, Burrough-Boenisch, 1999; Swales & Feak, 2004, pp. 284-286), and of parts of the paper, such as the introduction, e.g. the CARS model (Create A Research Space, Swales, 1990, pp. 140 ff.),

language (for instance in terms of appropriate formality, expressions of caution, and tenses that are typically used in a particular part of a paper, e.g. Burrough-Boenisch, 2002; 2003; 2005; Springer, 2012), and conventions for referring to sources (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2010).

The importance of adhering to these conventions of academic English is also stressed in the guidelines for authors published by academic journals. Elsevier journals, for instance, have videos that inform prospective authors about the conventions they should follow in the structure of their papers (Elsevier Journal structure, n.d.) and the language they should use (Elsevier Journals language, n.d). These conventions are also treated in online information, tutorials, video lectures and APA/writing exercises offered by a number of academic writing centres, such as those at Purdue University (Purdue OWL, 2014) and Massey University (Massey University, 2010). Over the years, many very useful course books have been produced to help learners of English become familiar with the conventions for academic writing in English (e.g. Bolt & Bruins, 2013; Jordan, 1999; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004; Weissberg & Buker, 1990). The books by Swales and Feak, Weissberg and Buker, and Bolt and Bruins are particularly relevant to the kind of empirical academic writing our students need. These are the books that our course for first-year students builds on, both in terms of theory and advice, and in terms of practical activities.

Course content

Following the areas identified as important in the literature, our course focuses on the conventions of different academic genres in terms of structure and language, and on conventions for referencing sources.

Empirical research articles

The main academic genre that the course focuses on is the research article reporting empirical research: corpus analyses, surveys and experiments. Our students are asked to analyse the elements that make up the various sections of such empirical research articles, and to write such sections in guided writing assignments. The course is taught over 14 weeks with two 90-minute sessions per week. Of these 28 sessions, six are completely devoted to research articles in the area of international business communication: two experiments, two surveys and two corpus analyses. Students answer questions about the structure of the articles and are asked to formulate comprehension questions about aspects of the articles they do not understand and critical questions about aspects they find problematical (for example, about the studies' design, such as weaknesses in the methods used). In this way, we not only attempt to make students aware of academic writing conventions, but also promote their insight into different research strategies and methodological issues.

The most basic convention of empirical research articles we want students to become familiar with is their overall structure: Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion and Conclusion, and References. In order to achieve this, we ask them to answer a number of questions about each of the articles they read:

1. *What* was researched?
2. *Why* was it researched?
3. *What theory* was used?
4. How was it researched?
5. What are the most important findings?
6. How is the article organised? What sections does it contain? What is each section about?
7. Are there any aspects of the study or the article that could be improved upon?
8. Describe a possible new study that is suggested by the findings of this study

These questions aim to help students think about the different types of information an empirical research article should provide – and how the various sections of the article contribute to giving this information. Question 6 explicitly asks students to investigate the sections that make up the article and their functions. In order to answer the other questions, students have to closely study the various parts of the research article. For questions 1 to 3, they need to analyse the Introduction. For question 4, they need to study the Method section, and for question 5, they need to be able to pick out the main information from the Results section. For questions 7 and 8, students need to study the parts of the Conclusion and Discussion section that deal with limitations and suggestions for further research. We hope that these questions also stimulate their critical thinking.

In order to further familiarize our students with the elements of the various parts of a research article, the “moves” (Swales, 1990), we devote a separate seminar to each of the sections: Introduction, Method, Results, Conclusion and Discussion, and Abstract. For each section, students read information from Weissberg and Buker (1990) about the elements that it typically contains and they try to identify these in a number of research articles in the field of international business communication. For instance, does each Introduction indeed contain a setting, review of the literature, gap statement, and purpose? In order to provide students with relevant standard phrases for each section of a research article, we ask them to read Bolt and Bruins’s (2013) ‘Useful phrases per section of your article’. To put this knowledge into practice, we ask students to write a section on the basis of information we provide them with. They may, for instance, be given a table with data and asked to write a Results section based on this information. In another guided writing exercise, they may be provided with information in keywords about the design, the material, the participants, the instruments, the statistical treatment, etc., of a Method section and be asked to write the section on the basis of these keywords.

We also try to make our students aware of the language conventions associated with the various parts of research articles by asking them to read information and do exercises relating to tense, caution, and formality. In relation to tense, we provide our students with the information from Weissberg and Buker (1990) about the tenses typically used in the various elements of the sections of research articles, for instance, the use of the present tense to refer to tables (“Table 1 shows”) and the use of the simple past tense to describe findings. We then ask them to check tense use in the relevant sections of the six articles that report empirical research in the field of international business communication, to see whether the tenses match the guidelines in Weissberg and Buker. In addition, we also ask them to do gap-filling exercises with passages from the various sections of research articles. In such exercises, we have replaced all the verb forms with infinitives and ask the students to supply the correct tense form for each of these. To

make students aware of different ways of expressing caution, we ask them to do some background reading and exercises from a general course book on academic writing (Jordan, 1999). We then ask them to identify how caution is expressed in the Discussion section of one of the six articles they are required to read. To familiarise them with the conventions of formal academic style, we ask them to read background information and do exercises from Swales and Feak (2004, pp. 14-30). We also ask them to do online formality exercises (e.g. Academic Writing in English, n.d.).

Research posters

Another academic genre we require our students to be familiar with is the research poster. It may not be as common as the research article, but it is a frequently used means of disseminating academic knowledge at conferences. Our approach is similar to the approach we use for research articles. We ask our students to read background information and do exercises relating to research posters from Swales and Feak (2000, pp. 80-113). Next, we ask them to use the information from Swales and Feak to analyse the weak and strong points of a research poster they are required to find on the Internet. Finally, we ask them to design a research poster based on a recent research article from a journal that is relevant to international business communication. At regular intervals, versions of these posters are peer evaluated in class using checklists (e.g. Hess, n.d.). From a didactic perspective, we find that research posters are a particularly useful genre because they encourage students to present complicated information in a simplified manner, which means that they must really grasp what is presented in a research article and show their understanding of its content.

Academic blogs

The final academic genre that we ask our students to engage with is more informal than research articles and research posters. As business communication students, they also have to be able to popularise academic knowledge. We therefore ask them to write academic blogs, one for each of the six empirical research articles they are required to read. As with the research posters, we hope that presenting the content of a research article in a much shorter form and in a way that should be suitable for a general audience means that students really have to grasp the main points of the article. To familiarise students with the genre of academic blogs, we first ask them to read some background information about academic blogging (Burton, 2012; Tomsons, 2007) and to analyse some academic blogs on topics relevant to international business communication (e.g. Piller, 2013). In order to make the assignment as realistic as possible, we ask the students to post the blogs they write on a blogging site. In class, students peer evaluate each other's blogs in terms of content, structure, presentation and language use.

Referencing

In our department, our students are required to follow APA conventions for referring to sources in their academic papers. In the course, we therefore ask our students to study information about conventions for APA-style in-text citations and references for the main types of sources students are likely to use, for example, journal articles, books, articles in edited books, and several online sources (based on the APA handbook, American Psychological Association, 2010). In relation to in-text references, we also discuss the difference between author-prominent

citations and information-prominent citations (Weissberg & Buker, 1990, pp. 43-45 and 51-53). In addition, students watch a series of mini-lectures on APA referencing on Youtube in their own time (Massey University Student Learning Centre, n.d.a, n.d.b). We then ask our students to do a number of exercises in which they need to apply APA conventions. On the basis of bibliographic information as found in online bibliographies such as EconLit or JSTOR, for instance, they are asked to write a number of different in-text citations and a number of references. We also refer them to online self-scoring exercises in which they can test their knowledge of APA conventions for referencing (e.g. APA Reference Style: Tightening Up Your Citations, n.d.; Cardiff University Information Services, n.d.).

Students' opinions about the course

Towards the end of the course taught in the academic year 2013-2014, we asked our students in an online survey what they thought about the various topics dealt with in the course. In total, 39 students (out of 54) participated in the survey (74.4 % female; mean age: 20.11, *SD*: 2.18). For each topic, we asked them to rate how useful (32 items) and relevant (28 items) they thought it was, and to what extent they felt they mastered it (17 items). So they for instance rated the following statements on 7-point scales:

What I have learned in the course about [APA conventions for in-text references / academic English / paraphrasing, etc.] was:

- *not useful at all - very useful*
- *not relevant at all - very relevant*

Examples of statements measuring the extent to which the students felt they mastered a particular topic were:

- *I can write the parts that a research article in English typically consists of*
- *I can use the formal language that is appropriate in English research articles*
- *I am familiar with the conventions of academic English*

The 7-point Likert scales ran from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree'. All the statements in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1. Cronbach's alpha was good for each dimension measured (usefulness: $\alpha = .96$; relevance: $\alpha = .96$; mastery: $\alpha = .91$). Therefore, we present means and standard deviations for each dimension, and not per individual question. The results showed that students overall thought the topics dealt with in the course were useful and relevant and they felt they had mastered them (usefulness: $M = 5.28$; $SD = 0.88$; relevance: $M = 5.21$; $SD = 0.86$; mastery: $M = 5.52$; $SD = 0.69$); three one sample t-tests showed that scores on all three dimensions were significantly different from 4, the midpoint of the scales (usefulness: $t(35) = 8.69, p < .001$; relevance: $t(34) = 8.25, p < .001$; mastery: $t(37) = 13.62, p < .001$).

Exam results

In order to check how well our students mastered the various topics dealt with in the course (e.g. APA conventions, caution, formality, identifying and writing sections of a research paper, creating a research poster), we also analysed their scores on the nine questions relating to these

topics in the exam they took at the end of the course. We present these in descending order, starting with questions the majority answered well and ending with questions only a minority answered well (see Table 1). The exam was taken by 54 students. The results showed that the vast majority of students correctly used APA conventions for references and in-text citations. A majority of students correctly used caution and tenses in a section of a research report (a method section in this particular exam). The majority of students also correctly identified parts of a research paper and correctly wrote part of a research paper (a results section in this particular exam), although quite a substantial proportion did not do very well at writing, mainly because they make too many language errors (phrasing, collocations, use of prepositions, etc.). Only a minority were able to distinguish the genre characteristics that distinguish research posters from research articles, to evaluate the structure, layout and language used in a sample poster in sufficient detail, and to identify inappropriately formal language in sentences and to replace these informal elements with appropriate formal elements.

Table 1: Proportion of students (N = 54) scoring a pass mark or higher on exam questions about course topics (2013-2014 exam).

Question (topic covered)	Percentage of students scoring more than 5.6 (pass mark)
<i>Turn the following information into a list of bibliographical references (as you would include them in a bibliography at the end of a paper) that fully adhere to APA conventions. Indicate the use of italics by <u>underlining</u> the relevant part of the reference</i> (Topic: References)	94.4
<i>Write an appropriate sentence that might be included in a research paper, incorporating the quotation and all other required information, following APA conventions</i> (Topic: In-text citations)	83.3
<i>Re-write each of the statements below to make them more appropriate for a Conclusion/ Discussion section. In other words, make each of the statements more tentative and cautious, using appropriate language devices to do so (e.g. modal auxiliaries, tentative verbs, tentative formulations, adverbs of possibility, etc.)</i> (Topic: caution)	79.6
<i>Fill in the right tense and the right voice (active/passive) for each of the verbs in capitalized letters in the following Method section</i> (Topic: tense conventions)	79.6
<i>Using the terminology used in the reader, label the elements that make up this part of the Research Paper. To achieve this, write down for each numbered sentence the element it belongs to</i> (Topic: Identification of sections of a research article)	68.5

On the basis of the data in the table, write a Results section. Incorporate all the required elements of a typical Results section as described in the reader, and make sure you adhere to the appropriate academic writing and language conventions 57.4

(Topic: Writing sections of a research article)

Name three characteristics that differentiate a research poster from a research article 25.9

(Topic: Genre conventions)

Evaluate the following poster in terms of structure, lay-out and language using the criteria discussed in class 24.1

(Topic: research poster)

The following sentences contain elements that are inappropriately informal. Identify these informal elements and replace them with formal equivalents suitable for an academic research paper 13

(Topic: Formality)

Conclusion

In conclusion, students find the topics dealt with in the course useful and relevant and think they have mastered all areas, but an analysis of the exam results shows this is not always the case. Areas students appear to have mastered sufficiently are referencing sources, and what may perhaps be called lower-level writing skills (the use of caution and tense use). They are also able to identify elements of a section of a research report. According to the analysis of the exam results, remaining problem areas for our students are writing sections of research reports, particularly the Results section, using formal English, and evaluating the characteristics of research posters.

The results of the survey and the analysis of the exam results presented here have an important limitation. Both the survey and the exam were administered at the end of the course. We did not administer a similar survey and a similar test at the beginning of the course. We therefore cannot measure the impact of the course by comparing students' views on the importance of the topics dealt with, their own estimation of their mastery of these topics, and their actual performance on questions relating to these topics before and after the course. We plan to conduct a study with such a pre- and post-test design for the course in the coming academic year.

The analysis of the exam results has revealed a number of problem areas for our students, which we should address by devoting more learning activities to these areas. One of these areas is writing. Despite the fact that we asked our students to write a number of blogs, a number of results sections and a number of method sections, the exam showed that our students still make a large number of writing errors.

We would like to end with a suggestion for further research. In applied linguistics, there has been much debate in recent decades as to whether EFL teaching should uphold native speaker norms or move towards a more inclusive global English (non-native) model (e.g. Davies, 2013; Paikeday, 1985). In line with this, the author instructions of the *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca* (n.d.) state that it expects “authors to submit manuscripts written in an English which is intelligible to a wide international academic audience, but it need not conform to native English norms”. Comparatively little research would seem to have been devoted to investigating the effect of non-native deviations from English native speaker norms on readers of research articles and on editors’ evaluations of research articles. Burrough-Boenisch’s (2003, 2005) work on evaluations of Dutch non-native use of hedging and of present tense use in reporting results is an exception, but more empirical studies should be conducted to determine whether non-native deviations in terms of structure and formality really matter for readers and editors. Only then will learners really know what aspects of academic writing in English they should learn.

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Appendix 1: Statements used in the survey about the course (in the actual questionnaire the statements were grouped by topic)

Statements relating to usefulness and relevance (measured on 7-point semantic differential scales anchored by not useful at all / very useful and not relevant at all / very relevant)

- What I have learned in the course about International Business Communication Research was
- What I have learned in the course about journals in the field of International Business Communication Research was
- What I have learned in the course about APA conventions for in-text references was
- What I have learned in the course about APA conventions for the list of References at the end of articles was
- What I have learned in the course about plagiarism was
- What I have learned in the course about paraphrasing was
- What I have learned in the course about using quotations was
- What I have learned in the course about academic language in English was
- What I have learned in the course about expressing caution in English was
- What I have learned in the course about the formal language that is appropriate in English research articles was
- What I have learned in the course about the parts of a research article in English was
- What I have learned in the course about the tenses used in the various parts of a research article in English was
- What I have learned in the course about research posters in English was
- What I have learned in the course about academic blogs in English was
- What I have learned in the course about corpus analyses was
- What I have learned in the course about experiments was
- What I have learned in the course about surveys was
- The course materials were
- The materials in the reader were
- The materials on Blackboard were
- Giving a presentation about a research article was
- Analysing research articles by answering the questions about research articles was
- The in-class discussions about research articles were
- Writing academic blogs was
- Making a research poster was

- The assignment in which you were asked to analyse and present the contents of a journal in the field of International Business Communication Research was
- The in-class APA exercises were
- The in-class writing exercises were

Statements only relating to usefulness (measured on 7-point Likert scales anchored by completely disagree / completely agree)

- What I have learnt in this course is useful for reading and interpreting research articles
- I feel that what I have learnt in this course will be useful in other courses in the future
- I feel that what I have learnt in this course will be useful for writing research papers for other courses in the future
- I feel that what I have learnt in this course will be useful when I am writing my Bachelor thesis in the future

Statements relating to mastery (measured on 7-point Likert scales anchored by completely disagree / completely agree)

- I know what International Business Communication Research is about
- I am familiar with journals in the field of International Business Communication Research
- I can apply APA conventions for in-text references
- I can apply APA conventions for the list of References at the end of articles
- I know what plagiarism is
- I can apply strategies to avoid plagiarism
- I can paraphrase sources
- I can use quotations
- I am familiar with the conventions of academic language in English
- I can express caution in English
- I can use the formal language that is appropriate in English research articles
- I can identify the parts that a research article in English typically consists of
- I can write the parts that a research article in English typically consists of
- I can identify the tenses in the various parts of a research article in English
- I can use the correct tenses in the various parts of a research article in English
- I can make research posters in English
- I can write academic blogs in English