



English for Academic Purposes: Perspectives and Pedagogical Implications at College level

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Abstract

The current paper discusses about one of the significant aspects of higher education today that is academic language. The paper briefly drafts the conceptual framework and anatomical aspects of academic English language. In addition to this, the paper throws light on the features of academic language and the issues of teaching academic language in higher education context. The paper is theoretical in nature. On the other hand, it introduces some of the issues of teaching Academic English language followed by some practical implications of teaching. After addressing the teaching-learning issues, the paper concisely highlights on the possible strategies of teaching academic language and designing teaching-learning materials for students through which the current academic language standards can be developed. The strategies suggested in the paper involve use of textual, technical as well as practical aids of instructions to arise the interest and balance of pedagogical methods.

Keywords: anatomical aspects, language standards, pedagogical

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Introduction

Language is a crucial aspect of humanity and considered as one of the primary needs of survival in the world and highly utilized in the fields of pedagogy. Language serves knowledge and frames appropriate sources from visual and numerical information. Teaching language in particular a foreign language in a class, requires concrete planning, systematic approach and need based materials to get positive outcomes. Teaching English in a country where thousands of languages are in existence-institutional settings based teaching methods, schema of regional languages and culture, various types of teaching aids and so forth may become the basic requirements. However, teaching academic English is a different area and more challenging for teachers as well as students due to its complicated nature. The proposed research throws light on some of the possible teaching strategies of academic language and also suggests the effective ways of designing materials for an academic English language classroom.

Academic language: Concept and nature

Academic language is an umbrella term. Primarily it can be considered as any language that is being used in institutional settings for teaching-learning purposes. The specific meaning of the term 'academic language' is a language of research that can be used in higher educational programs and a language that is used in research works at international level, having universal linguistic standards and dimensions. A language deliberately differs from creative writing, critical writing or any other writing which can be recognized as 'Non Academic languages'. Apart from specific invocations of academic language and anxiety about its insufficient development, academic language has no explicit definitions (Snow & Uccelli, 2008). Chamot and O'Malley (1994) defined academic language as a language through which teachers and learners can obtain new information and proficiency. It is a step by step process as Bailey suggested that to become proficient in academic language is to be acquainted and capable of using regular as well as content related lexis, specific and complex patterns of grammar, assorted functions of language and discourse structures to comprehend the new knowledge and expertise, to create conversation about the theme or to convey information to other people (Snow & Uccelli, 2008). According to the needs of various forms of academic writing or academic language, variance can be found. For example, hypothetical paper includes the citations of other works or details, research outcomes and methodology and the rest. The details mentioned above indicate that research journal as one of the academic works comprises factors of research procedures and results. Another example of academic writing is Term paper or a Classroom assignment which may be performed by Post Graduate students. The report contents outcomes and process which may become empirical research. The above discussed forms are the specific forms of academic language (Monippally & Pawar, 2010).

Structure of academic language

Academic language is varied from general or non-academic languages in terms of structure, principles, characteristics, functions and dimensions. In academic works, formal language is preferable. Certain abbreviations such as 'won't', 'shouldn't', 'can't' and the rest should not be used. Equally, idiomatic or conversational expressions should also be avoided. Bold metaphors have hardly ever been used in academic works. Academic writing follows the principles of specific genres (Monippally & Pawar, 2013:78 to 81). Prior studies in the area of academic writing found that cohesion, coherence, syntactic patterns, complexity, accuracy, fluency, lexical concreteness and academic language are the important aspects of academic work through which quality of any academic work can be evaluated (Rajeshwari, 2018). The major focus in academic language is on: 1. Audience/readers, 2. Content, 3. Style, 4. Organization, 5. Grammar and 6. Vocabulary. The levels of formality in academic language can be decided by focusing on the areas mentioned above. Use of full forms, cohesive devices, nominal groups, use of passive voice to focus on work rather than person, concise and academic vocabulary, objective point of view and qualitative language create a demarcation between academic language and non-academic language (Lyons & Heasley, 2010). Academic language is also known as language of research, a language that connects large academic community worldwide, internationally accepted language of researches. Long essays, journals, research proposals, research papers, thesis,

dissertations, research reports, academic discourse and so forth are some of the examples of academic language based work. Academic work generally involves introduction to the specific area, issues, research process, data, outcomes and the like by providing objective and evidence based arguments as personal arguments and beliefs have no scope to be added in academic work. Using specific tense, coherence in paragraph, logical flow of ideas or arguments, acknowledgement are some of the inevitable elements of academic language.

Scenario of Academic language

Academic language is the center of discussion for people concerned with higher education especially for academicians. The whole academic community including teachers in schools and colleges/ universities, research scholars, academic writers and so forth. The language has complex structures with pre-specified principles and language forms. During the study, a few researches have been found in the arena of academic language especially for the implication purposes. “Ironically, although academic language skills are widely cited as the obstacle to achievement for struggling readers in general, much of the empirical research on academic language has been done by those studying English Language Learners (ELLs)” (Snow & Uccelli, 2008).

Difficulties of academic language are not only the issues of India but can also be considered as global issues. Study conducted in United Kingdom at Higher Education level found some common issues. For instance, Varieties in the language levels of students, various learning fields of study, diversity in the approaches of academic writing, less usage of academic vocabulary, informal ways of writing, unstructured writing which creates confusion to readers, use of wrong spellings, rarely paid attention towards punctuation marks, plenty of grammatical issues, not doing acknowledgement of original works or authors. The mentioned details were the key reasons behind the academic language failure at United Kingdom.

Academic language classrooms

“Throughout the educational system, and higher education is certainly no exception, the focus has all too often been on the final product and the grade awarded rather than what the student learns as part of the writing process. As a consequence, students’ ability to write tends to stagnate once the basic skills have been mastered. Based on the view that the goal of higher education must be life-long learning...” (Mattisson, 2012). This could be the responsible factor of the lower standards of academic language. Conducting a language classroom, in particular the academic language classroom has need of systematic planning, planning of contents, tasks, ways of presentation, warming up discussions, practical tasks, language production and exposure and so forth. It is beneficial to have a substitution of each plan and guidance if possible from expertise through which effective language classroom can be created.

Challenges in ALT

Teaching or learning academic language is significant as well as challenging task for teachers and students of higher education such as students of Post Graduation, M.Phil students and PhD students. Academic language is not new language for students as they have studied the language in their textbooks or resource materials during their educational journey. However, the language seems challenging at some extent for the students. The causable factor behind the issue is that students have been studying and reading academic language in their course books on the other hand they used to write in general English language. Moreover, in higher education students are expected to produce academic language, a scientific and systematic language. While writing a research report or assignment, thesis or dissertation; students need to study the complex features and patterns of academic language which they have never practiced before.

Teachers of academic language need to work hard for teaching the language to the students who already have different formats of general English language. If students will be provided reading practices of academic language followed by well controlled discussions for the demarcation between academic and non-academic language, it will be easier for students to understand and produce the language as novice writers. Choice of academic lexis is very crucial while producing academic

language, for instance, selection of similar words, opposite words, phrases, tenses and the like. Although, teachers many times face the issues while designing materials for academic language practices. Instead of conducting theoretical classes, it is appreciated to conduct practical and ICT based classrooms which directly or indirectly appeal the linguistic sense of students.

Material development for ALT:

It is difficult for teachers to design materials for academic English language teaching as they need to be attentive towards the standards of General English language of students first and then teachers can design the materials according to the linguistic needs of students. In market, one may find series of commercial books available for Academic English language separated according to the fields of knowledge. The books are good option to be introduced in classrooms as resource books or workbooks. However, teachers should design their own materials as it is teachers' responsibility to reach at the levels of students and to develop their language by providing such practices and stage of language production. While designing materials for Academic English, some of the points should be taken into consideration by teachers, they are:

1. The language of tasks or notes for beginners should be easier and there should be comparison process of Academic English and General English in a form of discussions.
2. Even though, the language requires more writing practices, students should be provided academic reading first before practicing writing assignments.
3. Teachers should select some good research works or long essays as teaching materials and give instructions to students to study the language and note down the differences.
4. Teachers should design task sheets, asking for one or two words answers at first and day by day can reach to the long essay writing.
5. Teachers can ask students to design materials or ask for some suggestions for learning academic language that become more student centered and needs based.

Strategies of teaching academic language

Teaching any language is a step by step procedure which requires pre-planned structure of introducing the content in classroom. As mentioned by David Gugin (2014), "What works for one teacher in one classroom may not work for other teachers in other classroom..." (p. 27). Before teaching Academic English to students, it is expected to test their general English language through which need based activities and sessions can be planned by a teacher. ELT (English Language Teaching) is a field of methods where hundreds of teaching techniques, their impacts, positive and negative aspects and so on are being studied. To provide the remedies of teaching academic language, it is fair enough to use major techniques or innovations of ELT. Some of the possible strategies are mentioned below which may create leaning if implicated in a controlled manner.

1. Teaching academic language through Field Visits

Before learning or teaching academic language as a language of research it is better to build familiarity with the language of institutions that is a basic definition of academic language. It is prolific to have some experiments or practical learning for academic language. Basically in institutions, boards with objectives, visions, achievements and the like are available. To understand academic language as a language of institute, this activity will become more interesting and at the same time students will be able to observe common patterns of academic language. One observation report could be given as an assignment to learners.

2. Teaching academic language through Critical Media Literacy

This strategy was suggested by Grigoryan and Mark King (2008) in one of their research works entitled "Adbusting: Critical Media Literacy in a Multi-Skills Academic Writing Lesson" (pp 02-09). Students should be given projects of writing drafts by using authentic materials or materials based on media. Writing paragraphs by observing authentic materials, is not so challenging tasks for students if they are instructed to write in general English, however writing in academic English improves the analytical skills, observation skills, judge others' language and so on.

3. Teaching through ICT: (Multimedia, E-Conversations)

ICT: Information Communication Technology is in trend nowadays. If it is used in academic classroom, language learning may become easier and effective. For instance, video of a foreign English classroom can be shown to students. After that, they should be given a task to draft a paragraph in General English and then in academic language which helps students to understand the usage and patterns of academic language. Moreover, online stages can also be used to practice academic language by arranging international E- conversations.

4. Assessing and Analyzing academic works

This strategy will provide practices of higher order thinking skills which is sufficient for academic work. Through this strategy, students can assess the works of other writers and will assess and analyze short writings at first and then will analyze research papers and long essays. The procedure can be introduced under the title 'peer review' through which students can comprehend the inner aspects of academic language and its functions.

5. Preparing classroom Academic Dictionary

This strategy facilitates learners to be independent and conscious for academic lexis and structures. Instead of using mobile dictionary or readymade dictionaries, at the beginning stage of language learning if students are given the task to prepare their own dictionary either individually or in a pair, it becomes interesting and offers an additional comprehensibility to the lexical structures of academic language.

6. Writing Reflective Dairy

The concept of reflective diary- a kind of self assessment as a teacher has been being used actively in the teaching disciplines such as B. Ed and ELT. The concept can be used in academic language context by applying some modifications, for instance, students should be given an instruction of 'assessing their present academic language level' either by their own or by the guidance of teachers and note down their levels. The next step can be 'maintaining the progress reports' by students in the reflective diaries and compare the progress at every week-end or at specific time span, to check the learning pace. This process gives an idea to students about their language and understanding levels at the same time it provides a brief report to teacher for the effects of teaching methods and classroom practices which facilitates new ways of conducting the upcoming sessions.

7. Arranging Symposium in class

Symposium simply means a discussion of and about research or some serious issues of pedagogy followed by peer reviews and logical arguments. If a symposium is arranged in classroom first informally and then systematically, it provides students the environment of discussion, arguments, taking judgments and claiming counter questions to the statements of others- which facilitate the practical learning. Teachers can control the discussions if it alters the key areas and changes the track. This practice of symposium in class increases the confidence level, higher order thinking skills and develops their academic spoken discourse.

8. Class Academic Community

The term 'Academic community' includes teachers, professors, research students and scholars. Suppose students form discussions in a class or in groups by using social media platforms, they learn more and can argue with each other on specific areas of education. These discussions become a real world practices which, later on will become crucial for the students.

9. Practicing Academic Genres

After reaching at certain language levels, for instance, average or competent level, teachers can provides some tasks of practicing academic genres such as: paraphrase, summary, synthesis and synopsis, which clarifies the ideas of students about their understanding towards the structures of academic language.

10. Developing research works by using Constructive approach

Constructive approach is considered as one of the significant approaches as it improves the skills of learners. Teachers should provide background information about a particular topic and then students are expected to build the knowledge on it. After introducing the factors of academic language, teachers can ask to write opinions, suggestions or arguments to the works of other scholars and even can ask to write their own research works and reports as well.

Conclusion

The arguments and information from the prior sections of this research clearly recommend that Academic language is crucial part of pedagogy, the first and foremost element at Higher Education. It is not adequate for academic members to be proficient only in General English but they also need to be proficient enough in Academic English. Certain strategies given in the paper can have positive outcomes and gradual changes in the language levels of students if implicated with proper planning. Teaching academic language by using ICT materials, Field visits and practical ways of teaching creates interesting and active learning attitudes among learners and affect their cognitive domains to grasp the new structures and limited usages of a language called Academic language.

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