

# **CHAPTER 7**

## **THE TEACHING OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH TO UPPER-SECONDARY STUDENTS IN NORWAY**

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### **Introduction**

Drammen Upper-Secondary School is one of Norway's largest academic upper-secondary schools, where students can choose from a wide range of subjects, including combinations of languages, science, social sciences, and economics, as well as specialised areas such as entrepreneurship (Inspiro), a research programme, and Drammen International, a bilingual study programme with an international profile. We also offer educational programmes in art, design, and architecture; elite sports; and a vocational programme in service and transportation. We have an S-class for students with special needs. The school's management team consists of eleven inspectors and department heads, each responsible for their respective subject areas and staff, as well as the principal. Although the school is organised into subject areas, we work closely together and across subjects towards the school's common goals.

As an English teacher, I teach students the differences between formal and informal text. We have not, however, focused so much on academic English in the past, and I feel that students really need to work on this now. They need to learn the differences between the type of English they have had in the past and the type of English they need to learn and master during their three years at upper-secondary school. My motivation is therefore that I need to improve my teaching of academic English in class, so that our students are better prepared for their future university studies.

For this project, I have worked with students in their first year of upper-secondary school. They are students in our bilingual programme, Drammen International,

and the focus of the project is the teaching and learning of academic English. My research question is:

- In what ways can I teach academic writing for VG1 while maintaining an engaging and motivating environment for the learners?

The reason I wanted to focus on this is that I felt my students needed more practical learning and training to improve their academic language. In the competence aims for English in the first year of the upper-secondary school, the pupil is expected to be able to:

- 1) listen to, understand and use academic language in working on one's own oral and written texts
- 2) express himself or herself in a nuanced and precise manner with fluency and coherence, using idiomatic expressions and varied sentence structures adapted to the purpose, receiver and situation
- 3) use knowledge of grammar and text structure in working on one's own oral and written texts (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019)

This shows that the curriculum focuses on academic language, and as a result, it is important for teachers to address this in the classroom. Another reason I chose this topic is that we educate Drammen International students who are being prepared for university and the English-speaking world, and we would like them to be as well prepared as they can possibly be.

## **Methodology**

The method I used was surveys. The students were asked about what academic writing involves before and after a workshop on academic language and writing. In the first survey, they answered the following questions:

- 1) What do you understand by the term academic language?
- 2) What do you think academic writing involves?
- 3) What do you think is the best way to learn how to write academically?

The reason I chose surveys was that they are efficient and manageable in the short time I had available. I also think the three questions helped the students in their learning process, giving them a chance to reflect on the topic before and after the workshop. They answered the questions online in a Forms questionnaire.

## Combining Research and Teaching

Before we started, I informed the students that I was taking part in the TREL project and that the aim was to research my teaching and their learning in the classroom. I also said that I would prepare some questions they could answer anonymously before and after a workshop that we would have over two lessons, in weeks 16 and 17 in April.

First, they answered questions about what academic writing involves and what they think is the best way to learn to write academically. This was done on 16 April 2024. Twenty-five students were present and answered the questions. They could take as long as they needed. After that, we continued with a workshop over two lessons, with an introduction to the topic and some exercises. After the workshop, they were asked the same questions again on 22 April, and in addition were asked in what ways the last lesson and today had helped their understanding of academic writing. Finally, they were invited to include suggestions to improve the learning process. Twenty-two students were present for the second questionnaire. Here are the questions they answered:

- 1) What do you understand by the term *academic language*?
- 2) What do you think academic writing involves?
- 3) What do you think is the best way to learn how to write academically?
- 4) In what ways did the last lesson and today help your understanding of academic writing?
- 5) Do you have any suggestions to improve the learning process of academic language?

I think the questionnaires, even though I was going to use the answers in my project, would have been useful for the students regardless. The first questionnaire helped activate their prior knowledge of the topic, and the last questionnaire helped them reflect on what they had learnt. The first survey and workshop were conducted during week 16 on 16 April, and the last workshop and survey the following week. The reasons why there was a short time between the two surveys were twofold: I wanted the students to benefit from this learning before their mock exams in English, and I needed to have the data ready for the meeting with the TREL researchers.

# Classroom Activities in Weeks 16 and 17, 2024

I attended a lecture by Hilde Hasselgård in 2023 and used some of her advice when I created the PowerPoint presentation and planned the classroom activities.

## Nobody is a native speaker of academic English

Academic English can be acquired.

- Practicing bits of academic grammar (passive, nominalization...)
- Finding precise and nuanced vocabulary, including relevant terminology, to be used for a particular writing task. (synonyms in dictionaries, vocabulary from relevant texts...)
- Reading “model texts” and writing similar ones on a related topic.
- Planning and revising the text. (Not a spontaneous genre for most people...)
- Reflecting on writer/reader involvement in the text.
- Reflecting on writing purpose, target readership in relation to the topic/task.
- Working with difficult English might help us become better language users in general – not just academic English.

**Image 1.** PowerPoint slide by Hasselgård (2023)

I also included two YouTube films made by different universities to explain more thoroughly to the students how to structure and write academically. The first video I used was *What is Academic Writing? 7 Features of Academic Writing* (EAP Foundation, 2021). The second one I used was *How to Write an Academic Essay in 10 Minutes or Less* (Blackhaze231, 2022).

We talked about the various features of academic writing mentioned in the first video, i.e. that texts need to be evidenced, critical, balanced, precise, objective and formal. We also talked about the formulas presented by David Taylor in the second video. In addition to this, I used some exercises to help the students practise sentence structures and to learn about the differences between simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentence structures.

I have used both the term academic language and academic writing when talking about this topic. However, most of the questions the students were asked focused on academic writing.

## Data Analysis

As I asked the students open-ended questions, I needed to spend some time reading through their responses to find similarities and differences and interpret the answers.

## Findings

### What Do Students Think Academic Writing Involves?

In the first questionnaire, 25 students responded; in the second, 22 students responded. When asked what they think academic writing involves, 11 students in the first questionnaire mentioned vocabulary and academic vocabulary

. In the second questionnaire, only three students mentioned that. Seven students mentioned the formality of the text in the first questionnaire, whereas twelve mentioned it in the second. Eight students mentioned grammar in the first questionnaire, while only three mentioned it in the second. Four students wrote that avoiding contracted words is important in the first questionnaire, while only two mentioned this in the second. When it comes to organised and clear structure, seven students mentioned it in the first questionnaire, while eleven mentioned it in the last. In terms of factual and source-based information, only one student mentions it in the first questionnaire, while six students mention it in the second. In the first questionnaire, no one focuses on academic writing as objective, unbiased, and balanced; however, in the second questionnaire, seven students mention that. In the first questionnaire, two students focus on academic writing as precise, while seven students focus on this in the second. In the first questionnaire, two students mentioned that academic writing needs to be polite, while the term “polite” is not mentioned in the second questionnaire. Two students in the first questionnaire focus on academic writing as involving the thinking process, while 1 student mentions this in the second questionnaire, commenting that it involves critical thinking.

In the first questionnaire, the data show a sense of academic writing as being “proper”: one student refers to it as having “proper language”, another as “an advanced way of writing”, and one as “a higher form of expression”. One student states that academic writing involves adapting to changes in communication, and interestingly, one student writes that it involves expressing what you think.

In the second questionnaire, the students show that they know more about the topic. More students focus on academic language as being evidenced, balanced, precise, and objective. Some responses are harder to categorise. One student states that academic writing involves writing “perfect” essays that focus on one topic only. Another states that it involves being as “far away from your own text as possible”, and another writes that it is explicit and responsible.

When it comes to academic vocabulary, there is a significant decrease from eleven responses in the first questionnaire to three in the second. There is also a decrease from eight to three students who think correct grammar is important, and a drop from four to two students who mention avoiding contracted words. These results could indicate that students consider academic vocabulary, correct grammar and contracted words as less important after the workshop. However, it may also be that other topics have simply taken priority. I think the latter is probably most correct, because we also see a notable increase from seven to twelve responses when it comes to formal language. In terms of organised and clear structure, there is a significant increase from seven to eleven responses. The findings also show a substantial increase from one to six responses for evidence-based writing, and an increase from none to seven responses for writing as objective, unbiased, and balanced. This does not necessarily mean students were unaware of these things before, but after the workshop they were clearly more aware. The responses about polite language drop from two to none in the second questionnaire. This may indicate that politeness is considered less relevant in academic writing, or it may be that the students regard it as part of the broader category of formal language.

To sum up, there is a decreased emphasis on academic vocabulary, correct grammar, avoiding contractions and polite language, and an increased emphasis on formal language, organised structure, factual evidence, objectivity and precision. These shifts are likely the result of the workshop, and the increased emphasis on structure, evidence and objectivity aligns well with what we were trying to teach.

### **What Do Students Think Is the Best Way to Learn to Write Academically?**

In the second question, students were asked about the best way to learn how to write academically. In the first questionnaire, five students focused on learning vocabulary, whereas this was not mentioned at all in the second. Five students pointed out the importance of studying and learning the rules of academic writing

in the first questionnaire, and six students pointed this out in the second. Ten students focused on the importance of practising writing texts in the first questionnaire, while seventeen pointed this out in the second. Ten students focused on reading texts in the first questionnaire, while only six did in the second. Two students focused on text comparison as a strategy in the first questionnaire and one in the second. In both questionnaires, one student stated that you only need to follow the teacher's instructions. In terms of using videos and online sites, three students pointed this out in the first questionnaire and six in the second. What is perhaps most interesting are the topics that appear in the second questionnaire but not the first: four students in the second questionnaire focus on the importance of feedback, while two point to the usefulness of model texts. One student mentions the importance of repetition, one focuses on using sources, and one focuses on having an open mind.

The best way to learn academic writing, according to the second questionnaire, is to practise writing — this increased from ten to seventeen responses. The second most popular method is using video and online sites, which increased from three to six responses. After the workshops, students also pointed out the importance of feedback, with an increase from none to four responses, and the use of model texts appeared for the first time, with two responses. Academic vocabulary dropped from five to no responses. As mentioned earlier, I think other topics may simply have taken priority, but to be sure, it would be necessary to ask the students again. Reading texts decreased from ten to six responses, which suggests students are more interested in practising writing than in reading about it.

To sum up, after the workshops, the students emphasised the need to practise writing texts, learn the rules, get feedback, and use model texts, videos, and online sites. This points to a hands-on, practical approach to learning academic writing.

### **In What Ways Did the Lessons Help Students' Understanding?**

In the questionnaire, I asked about the learning outcomes of the two workshops on academic language. Eighteen of the 22 students said the lessons had helped them understand what academic writing is and how to write it. Thirteen wrote that it had helped them understand the structure of an academic text. Four students mentioned that it was helpful to learn that they could use videos in the learning process, and two pointed out that using model texts was useful. One student said they had learnt about how to start the introduction, and one had learnt that thesis

statements are essential. Finally, one student mentioned that the workshops had also been helpful in preparing for the mock exam.

With eighteen responses stating that the workshops helped in understanding what academic writing is and involves, this clearly shows that the lesson significantly clarified the topic for many students. The thirteen responses about structure also indicate that many found the lesson helpful in that respect. The fact that four students pointed to videos as a useful resource was encouraging, as this was something I had specifically included. Model texts and specific aspects like introductions and thesis statements were mentioned less frequently, but they were still noticed by some students.

Overall, the findings suggest that the lesson was particularly effective in providing a clearer understanding of what academic writing is and how it is structured, while also showing students that different types of resources can be useful in the learning process.

### **Do You Have Suggestions to Improve the Learning Process?**

When asked for suggestions, nine student responses focused on writing more texts, three on getting feedback, two on learning vocabulary, and one on reading more academic texts. One response said we should start learning academic language earlier, and one response indicated no suggestions were needed.

## **Limitations**

This study was done over a very limited time, and the students had not had much time to reflect on what they had learnt. One could argue that the study is weak because of the short time between the two questionnaires. The students were asked only a few open-ended questions, with no answer alternatives to consider. Had they been given different alternatives, the results might have been quite different. In the first question, the focus was on academic writing, whereas in the last question, I used the term academic language. It is possible that students would have answered differently had I used “academic writing” throughout. Looking at the answers, it seems most students continued to focus on writing in any case, but this inconsistency is worth noting.

## Final Reflections

This project is very small, and it was conducted during a limited time frame, so one might argue that the value of the findings is limited. Still, just focusing carefully on this topic has helped both my students and me. It has made us more aware of academic writing, so that next time my students write a text, they will be more conscious of how to approach it, and next time I plan a workshop on this, I will test new methods and try to improve. In that way, this has been worthwhile.

In addition, this project has led to better teaching of academic writing. Although I have taught academic writing before, I have not talked about it so explicitly with my students, and I have not provided such a detailed structural framework as I did this time through the videos and exercises we used. Another important aspect is the knowledge I have gained by actually seeing what my students understand. Evidence-based teaching provides me with insights I would not have had otherwise, and these findings have strengthened my belief in teaching in a way that students can understand, and that gives them many opportunities to practise what they have learnt. Through the presentation, the YouTube videos, and the exercises, they have gained a deeper understanding of what academic writing is. They have learnt that academic writing needs to be evidenced, formal, critical, and balanced, as well as precise and objective. I believe they will recognise academic language more easily now, and they will be more conscious of the features of academic writing when they write for different purposes in the future.

My research question was about how I can teach academic writing for VG1 while maintaining an engaging and motivating environment. As I did not directly ask the students whether they found the workshops engaging and motivating, it is hard to say for sure whether I succeeded in this. However, the fact that many of them say they would like to write more academic texts clearly shows that they are motivated to develop their language. As a teacher, I always try to teach in an engaging and motivating way, and that is something I will continue to focus on.

What I would have liked is to have had the TREL university-based partners even more involved in the project. It would be very helpful to have one TREL researcher working closely with each teacher-researcher through the whole process: from the research question to data collection, data analysis, teaching material, and the writing of the report. The university staff could take more ownership of each part of the process, while the teachers provide the classroom experiences and data. Us teachers do not really have time to research our own practice in depth, because we are too busy planning and delivering learning for

our students every day. And even though our school leaders support our participation in principle, we do not really get time set aside to work on this. If the university staff were more actively involved throughout, the quality of the research would certainly be higher. If the goal of the TREL project is to encourage teachers to research their own practices, it is important to plan in a way that suits the busy schedule of teachers. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to look at our own teaching in a more evidence-based way, and it is truly valuable to learn from university researchers. At the same time, the demanding reality of teaching should not be underestimated. Since participating in projects like this requires additional time, we must always think carefully before committing.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the TREL partners for their collaboration and support in conducting research in my classroom. I am especially grateful to the staff at USN and OsloMet for taking time out of their busy schedules to work with us. Although this project was limited in scope, it has nonetheless brought meaningful changes to my classroom and to my teaching practice, and for that I am grateful.

## References

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