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Academic Literacy and Oracy beyond Disciplinary Boundaries: Towards a Conceptual Framework for the Systematic Development of Academic English Curricula

Abstract

Kurse im Bereich Wissenschaftsenglisch stehen derzeit an deutschen Sprachzentren hoch im Kurs. Die vielfältigen Ausgestaltungen entsprechender Lehrformate wie auch die Breite an Forschungsansätzen im Bereich EAP zeigen jedoch, dass das Konzept „Wissenschaftsenglisch“ keineswegs einheitlich verstanden wird. In diesem Beitrag schlage ich deshalb eine Bestandsaufnahme und methodische Konzeptualisierung derjenigen Inhalte vor, die für einen fundierten wissenschaftlichen Sprachgebrauch potentiell relevant sind. Dabei verstehe ich Wissenschaftssprache als Funktion einer diskursiven Praxis, die ihren Nutzern eine kulturspezifische *Academic Literacy/Oracy* zuweist. Mit Hilfe dieses Konzeptes sowie des *Osnabrücker Referenzrahmens für Wissenschaftssprache* präsentiere ich eine systematische Darstellung der für wissenschaftsenglische Curricula wesentlichen Kategorien und skizziere zum Abschluss konkrete Anwendungsbeispiele.

1. Introduction

Courses dealing with some form of academic usage of English have by now been established at almost all German university language centers. Yet, such Academic English courses vary widely in scope and focus: interdisciplinary multi-skills formats are part of the program of ca. 35% of language centers, but come in different guises¹. In addition, courses focusing on a particular skill (usually writing) are offered by just over half of university language centers and a broad range of discipline-specific courses by about three quarters of them (for the current diversity of the “Fachsprachenausbildung” see also Jordan/Quennet 2018: 143). This diversity of formats might partly be due to many courses originating primarily in demands of various university stakeholders. Discipline-specific offers, in particular, often seem to address the belief of departmental heads or deans, as well as many students, that their respective subject has special language requirements that necessitate homogenous learner groups. The diversity of Academic English formats seems, however, also (and maybe even more importantly) to be related to contrasting perceptions of what characterizes the English used in academic contexts and what, therefore, should or could constitute the relevant content of a corresponding syllabus.

Such a pluralism of perceptions and approaches offers opportunities for discussing the role of German language centers in the advancement of Academic English teaching. At the same time though, this pluralism provides little guidance for the design of specific Academic English curricula. What is, therefore, needed is a commonly accepted conceptual understanding of Academic English as a basis for making appropriate and transparent curricular choices and for identifying and delimiting the content, topics, and issues of any Academic English course.

There is, of course, no dearth of reflections on the concept of Academic English, especially in the tradition of what is generally referred to as *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP). Here, the general notion of the English-Teaching Information Centre from 1975 that “EAP is concerned

¹ For the data in this paragraph, I have extracted the available online information from language centers or university course schedules for the Winter Semester 2018/19. I have used information from universities or technical universities only and have excluded universities of applied sciences and similar institutions as well as courses offered by English departments or workshops exclusively for research students because those are often part of graduate rather than language center programs.

with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education systems" (ETIC 1975: [v]) has been widely accepted. However, EAP practitioners have disagreed over what defines those "study purposes," and, depending on their focus, the delimitation of EAP content areas is, therefore, restrictive in at least one of the following three ways.

The focus of the English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) approach is, rather narrowly, on the needs of students in their particular course of studies. This approach stresses the relationship between academic language teaching and the students' specific discipline or subject. Writers such as Johns or Hyland have argued that generalizations about academic language conventions are difficult to make because differences between disciplines outweigh similarities (Johns 1988: 55) and a common core of academic language features would, therefore, be hard to establish (Hyland 2006: 11-13). Nonetheless, proponents of the ESAP approach have had to rely on rather general categories to define the supposed specificities of discipline-specific Academic English, and while their studies provide valuable suggestions for identifying the issues to be addressed in corresponding courses, their emphasis on difference and specificity restricts them to focusing on those areas in which differences are seemingly obvious.

In stark contrast, the English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) approach has focused on a common interdisciplinary core. This has helped identify a range of topics such as (stereo)typical features of academic writing across different disciplines (see Hyland 2006: 221), learning strategies and study skills essential for successful academic communication (Jordan 1997) or rhetorical and functional devices (Alexander/Argent/Spencer 2008). What all these approaches have in common, though, is their focus on the typical needs of non-native language students in English-speaking contexts of higher education. Likewise, most current EAP textbooks are either explicitly (*EAP Now!*) or implicitly (*Cambridge Academic English*, *Oxford EAP*) designed for students studying at tertiary level in an English-speaking country – even at a CEFR level of C1. The textbooks as well as the EGAP research indirectly reveal the cultural preferences (and prejudices) within Anglophone academia, and they, thus, have a restricted applicability to a European context where students with a generally higher degree of academic socialization in their native language are facing different types of assignments.

The textbooks and most of the research mentioned above, both in the EGAP and in the ESAP vein, are additionally restricted to the "study

purposes" of B.A. and M.A. students as they do not substantially consider the needs of post-graduate research students at the Ph.D. or post-doc level. Since, however, the transition between studying and researching is crucial for the career of junior researchers, a conceptual understanding of Academic English needs to look beyond the study purposes of students and include the research purposes of post-graduates as well. This requires a broad, inclusive view of what defines the content of Academic English before any pre-conceived rules or guidelines that are covered by much of the handbook literature for research students can even be postulated.

Altogether, the various restrictions of the theoretical and practical work on EAP, particularly in terms of academic discipline, cultural context, or career level, make it difficult to discern a commonly shared perception of the scope and content of Academic English or, more precisely, of a generally accepted comprehensive overview of what Academic English potentially encompasses. As a preliminary step towards such a comprehensive overview, my rather modest aim here is to propose a conceptual framework that delimits the central categories for systematically organizing any area of English language usage that students, researchers, and other academic professionals possibly need to become proficient in to express themselves academically. The framework, thus, identifies areas of proficiency, not primarily the necessary competences or guidelines to be followed for achieving such proficiency. What it does offer is a methodically structured pick-and-choose overview of the range of topics and issues to be considered in the design of any Academic English course. Thus, this framework can, I hope, be of use in the development of effective and well-focused academic language curricula, independent of their intended context. It facilitates the clarification of the content of a specific Academic English course and devise materials and tasks that help the students, depending on their concrete needs, develop competences to proficiently use their English academically. As such, the framework can give orientation to students and (new) lecturers as it makes curricular choices and selections transparent. And, it contributes to legitimizing the purpose of academic language teaching and to communicating our expertise as language teachers to institutional stakeholders and students alike.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Preliminaries

First and foremost, an understanding of what makes language usage *academic* – and what a proficient use of academic language entails – is crucial for the development of a conceptual framework for Academic English.

Like any linguistic utterance, academic language is not a transparent medium through which content and meaning are presented in their supposedly "pure" form; rather, it can be characterized as a functional language, as a "mode of utilizing" or "adapt[ing] a linguistic system to a certain goal of expression" (Mukařovský 1977: 4). As such, it is partaking in the construction and production of the "academicness" of subjects, as actors in "the academy," i.e., in university and/or research contexts, and of objects, as what those actors act upon. Academic language, thus, functions within the discursive practice of the academy, as "un ensemble de règles anonymes, historiques, toujours déterminées dans le temps et l'espace qui ont défini à une époque donnée, et pour une aire sociale, économique, géographique ou linguistique donnée" (Foucault 1969: 153 f.). Hence, the academy, and with it academic language, are involved in processes of power that constitute a particular truth or set of knowledge. Being academic means both having acquired that knowledge and being constructed by it. And, as academic language is simultaneously producing and being produced by knowledge, academic language usage emerges as a means of constructing its user as a knowledgeable subject, as a linguistically proficient actor, as being academically literate.

Here, academic literacy, as "what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context" (Lea/Street 2006: 369), is an indicator of proficiency in academic language usage, i.e., in functionally utilizing and adapting language within the discursive practice of the academy. It means more than learning skills necessary for academic study and more than becoming academically socialized: it carries ideological connotations as it relates to the institutional construction of social identities (as in Lea/Street 2006) or culturally "unified notion[s] of how language should be used" (as in Turner 2011: 20). Academic literacy can, therefore, be seen as having acquired that part of the knowledge discursively constructed by the academy that refers to linguistic utterances. It reveals the social and cultural participation in the discursive practice of the academy that permeates academic language usage – or, more specifically, the topics and issues relevant for the proficient production of academic texts.

The conceptual framework I propose is, therefore, a framework for academic literacy – or rather literacy and oracy (or litoracy) as it explicitly refers to both written and spoken texts and not, as most literacy models do, to written production only². As such, the framework has three defining qualities:

² The concept of oracy, as a pendant to literacy, goes back to Wilkinson 1965.

- First, as a framework *for* – and not *of* – academic literacy, it is *descriptive* rather than normative. It outlines categories that describe the main areas in which the discursively constructed language knowledge that forms the condition for academic literacy is acquired, but it does not endorse that knowledge itself or prescribe any of the rules of the discursive practice of the academy.
- Second, the framework is *interdisciplinary* as the categories it outlines can be applied across different disciplines. Any conventions or standards that might prevail in a given discipline and that are, therefore, part of this discipline's discursive practice belong to an area of knowledge described by one of those categories.
- Third, the framework is *interculturally malleable*: while the main categories of the framework can be used in diverse cultural contexts, the categories themselves are designed to address the cultural determination of any discursively constructed knowledge in general and of literacy, or proficient academic language usage, in particular. The strong "cross-cultural divergences" between English and German intellectual and communicative styles identified by Siepmann (2006: 132-143), for example, highlight the need to consider research conceptions and communication as interculturally applicable topics to describe culturally different discursive practices and non-absolute truths.

3. Towards a Conceptual Framework for Academic English Literacy

The conceptual framework I propose is based on the so-called *Osnabrücker Referenzrahmen für die Didaktisierung von Wissenschaftssprache*³. This interlingual model outlines general categories potentially relevant for teaching the academic usage of any language – categories that I will here interpret for and adapt to the concrete context of Academic English teaching (see Fig. 1). The framework consists of six main categories, of which the four categories represented by light grey rectangles form its conceptual core. These four core categories focus on knowledge about (written and spoken) academic texts as completed products, and they are

³ The *Osnabrücker Referenzrahmen* was jointly developed (in German) at the Sprachenzentrum of the University of Osnabrück by Stefan Serwe, head of the Language Center; Janna Gerdes, coordinator of the English Language Writing Lab (Schreibwerkstatt Englisch); Irene Vogt, coordinator of the Speaking Lab (Sprechwerkstatt); and myself as head of the Division of Foreign Languages for Academic Purposes.

arranged in two dichotomous ways (see below). A fifth category, which incorporates process-oriented approaches, frames these core categories, and a sixth category, which addresses the central pre-conditions for developing academic literacy in a particular cultural context, forms the framework's basis.

This basic category of **Academic Culture**, thus, covers key areas that students ought to be familiar with before proficient academic language usage on the whole can be achieved. Those areas, in fact, relate to notions of the academic, of language, and of usage in separate ways: first, students need to know how academic knowledge is generated and how the principles governing knowledge generation vary across cultures. This includes the value of such concepts as being systematic or objective, the meaning of "good" or "ethical" academic practice, approaches to thinking critically, or different ways of designing a research project. Second, if academic language is a mode of utilizing a linguistic system (see above), knowledge of how that system operates is essential. Students need to understand that English is a "resource" offering "systemic patterns of choice" (see Halliday/Matthiessen 2014: 23), but also that those choices are limited by generally accepted habits, cultural contexts, and discursive practices that define linguistic preferences and norms. Understanding both the possibilities and the limitations of language operation further allows for the development of practical knowledge such as using a concordance or acquiring appropriate vocabulary. Third, actually using (academic) language requires an awareness of the communication process such usage is part of and of the opportunities it offers. This includes a reflection of what makes communication successful (e.g., comprehensibility or clarity), familiarity with the interplay between language and other channels of communication (esp. in spoken performances), as well as an understanding of the hierarchies and ensuing roles within communication. In writing in particular, it is essential to grasp the intercultural differences between reader-based and writer-based prose. Together, the three basic areas comprising the category of Academic Culture yield three meta-approaches to language that inform the knowledge required in each of the four core categories of the framework: [a] language as a way to represent the conventions of academic activities; [b] language as a system of functional choices; [c] language as a constituent of communicative opportunities.

The first of these core categories refers to the **Stylistic Design** of Academic English and encompasses any topic related to forms of expression characteristically found on the sentence level of spoken and written academic texts. This category includes [a] general or discipline-specific

(surface) conventions of language usage – e.g., relating to register, lexis and lexical precision, or the use of active vs. passive forms; [b] linguistic means of delivering the information, gist, or meaning of (and in) a sentence – e.g., nominalization, theme-rheme development, or speed and volume modulation for stress; [c] techniques of rhetorically enhancing a written or spoken academic sentence to increase its effectiveness – e.g., concision, figures of speech, or interactional metadiscourse. The second core category of the framework covers **Textual Mechanisms**, i.e., any element of an academic text or relatively self-contained segment of a text that constitutes its textuality, that makes it a text. This includes [a] a text's or text segment's principles of composition (i.e., the ideas behind its construction) – such as, for Academic English, the concept of focus and unity, the use of linear vs. digressive or circular patterns, or the need to reduce information; [b] the arrangement of a text's / text segment's structural elements (i.e., the plan of its actual construction) – such as the functionality of introductory and concluding sections, the use of paragraphs as building blocks, the development from the general to the specific, or, more specifically, the control of a paragraph by way of topic sentences; [c] devices that support a text's flow, i.e., the perception of semantic connections between its individual elements – such as a coherent arrangement that indicates logical progression, signposts that suggest a structural outline, or cohesive markers and similar resources of interactive metadiscourse.

The third core category of **Operative Practices** is related to what is often called "rhetorical functions" or sometimes "essential elements" (de Chazal 2014: 62-66), but is conceived more broadly. Whereas "functions" primarily describe a way of using language purposefully within the text (and are, therefore, more part of the category of Textual Mechanisms), the issues addressed within the category of Operative Practices foreground how certain text passages enact (or reenact) procedures that academic work typically consists of. Through such textual activities, writers or speakers engage with different contexts, i.e., the academic material under study, the perspectives and positions of others, or one's own personality and frame of mind. Students here need to develop knowledge regarding [a] the different types of academic contexts that textual enactments or activities refer to – ranging from those with an epistemological goal (e.g., defining, describing, analyzing, classifying, comparing) to those with an interactional or referential aim (e.g., referencing, responding to criticism, rapport building) and those with a cognitive or positional purpose (e.g., stating objectives, explaining outlines, taking a stance); [b] the grammatical, syntactical, lexical, and sometimes phonological resources of English

at hand to control the actual textual realization of those activities; [c] the choice of methodological, technical, or organizational strategies to be considered when textually enacting typical academic procedures for communicative ends – such as approaches to defining, different effects of comparing vs. contrasting, strength of various types of arguments and responses, referencing styles, or paraphrasing techniques. The fourth core category of **Genre Performance** deals with the proficient employment of the variety of text types found in English academic contexts. This covers [a] a systematic view of how, following a “situation-driven procedure for genre analysis” (see Swales 2004: 72 f.), the concrete situation in and for which a text is used affects its purpose and, thus, its genre – with academic purposes including the (didactic) introduction of information (textbook, website), the presentation of research (journal article, report, presentation), the positioning of oneself (review, debate), the interaction with colleagues (poster, Q&A session), or the achievement of a goal (proposal, term paper); [b] concepts employed in the realization of a particular genre – such as the succession of moves, tense aspects in certain sections, or practical decisions (e.g. between clipped and elaborated Methods; see Swales 2004: 219-224); [c] the management of other media to support the communicative impact of certain genres – e.g., the use of slides or body language in presentations, the visual design of graphs or posters, or the activation of an audience.

The framing category of **Task Management** that literally surrounds the four core categories, finally, adds a process-oriented perspective to the framework without which the complexity of spoken or written Academic English could not be adequately understood. This category concerns the production and the reception of texts as well as connected processes involved in textual commentary (for instance, when assessing a text as lecturer or reviewer). In all three processes, an identification of typical activities before, during, and after the completion of a productive, receptive, or commentary task is essential for achieving a proficient handling of the key stages of preparation, implementation, and reflection – as well as the possible additional stage of dissemination (for example, the submission of a text to an instructor or a journal). Yet, as either process is complex and multifaceted, students need to have additional skills to handle those stages proficiently. This involves techniques to transfer and apply any knowledge of Academic English to a concrete, possibly discipline-specific context as well as what is usually referred to as critical thinking – which should, however, also include skills to resolve any problems or overcome potential challenges or obstacles (e.g., a writer's block).

4. Practical Application

As a systematic delimitation of areas of proficient Academic English usage, the conceptual framework can now serve as a transferable tool box and be operationalized for the design of any interdisciplinary or discipline-specific course. Here, multiple approaches are possible:⁴ for example, a course could begin with an identification of key features of academic culture in a given institutional context in order to then discuss how those features permeate any of the four core categories. Another option for designing an Academic English course is to pursue any logical succession of the core categories, depending on the concrete needs of the target group. Here, the arrangement of those four categories helps to set a focus:⁵ units on the style of academic sentences could, for instance, be followed by units investigating how such sentences operate within the textual enactment of certain procedures or by units focusing on how sentences are used to construct whole texts. Or, a survey of genres relevant for a particular target group could lead to an analysis of how those genres actualize basic mechanisms of text construction or to a discussion of which operative practices dominate in certain genres. An alternative, process-oriented approach to organizing an Academic English course is to follow the different steps necessary for managing the preparation, completion, and revision of an academic text and to make reference along the way to relevant areas of knowledge covered by the other categories.

Altogether, the framework offers teachers of Academic English a comprehensive overview of possible topics and issues to be considered in their course design and, thus, empowers them to make sensible cur-

⁴ Each of the examples given below is implemented, for different target groups, at the University of Osnabrück: the first in the interdisciplinary course „English für das Studium“ for beginning undergraduate students who need to be familiarized with academic language primarily in order to read academic texts; the second in the more discipline-specific courses „English for Studying at University“ for advanced B.A. and M.A. students in need of writing and speaking academically; and the third in the “Academic Writing” modules that are part of the ENGLISH+ program for post-graduate research students embarking on an academic career.

⁵ The arrangement visualizes two dichotomies: the basic principles underlying academic language usage (bottom categories) are juxtaposed to the concrete manifestations of these principles (top categories), and issues related to the building blocks of texts (left categories), such as sentences or small text passages, are juxtaposed to issues related to texts as whole, complete units (right categories).

ricular choices for developing their students' academic literacy. If and how the framework can further be applied to the usage of other languages in academic contexts makes an interesting point for future investigation and discussion.

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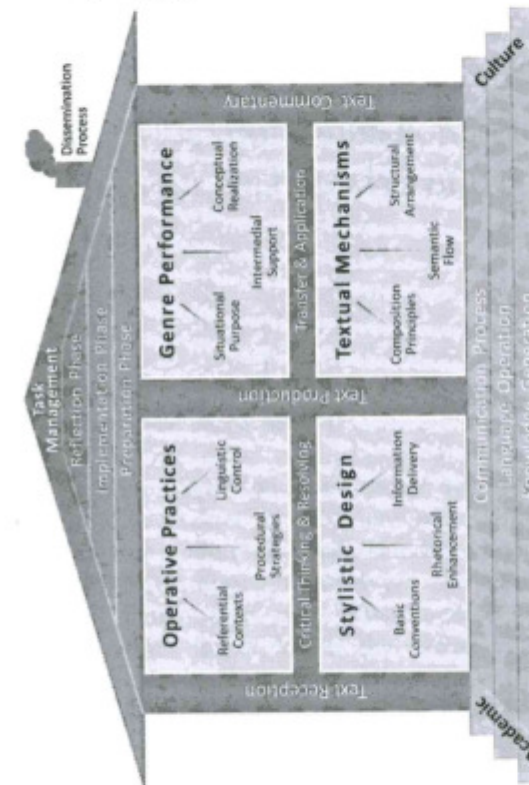


Fig. 1: Overview of the conceptual framework for systematically organizing the various areas of Academic English usage, based on the categories of the interlingual Osnabrück Framework.