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ARTICLES

A PILOT ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES COURSE FOR PROFESSORS AND RESEARCHERS

Michael Ennis, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy

In the spring of 2018, the Language Centre at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano received a request to organize an academic writing course for research assistants (postdocs) and researchers with fixed-term contracts (assistant professors without tenure). We have frequently offered English for specific purposes and English for academic purposes (EAP) courses for undergraduate and graduate students, and we offer general English courses for academic staff. But this was the first time—to my knowledge—that an EAP course for academic staff had been requested. We agreed to offer the course the following autumn/winter as a pilot project.

As the teacher of the course, I wanted time to conduct a needs analysis and plan an appropriate syllabus. I did not know how many course participants might enroll or what their areas of specialization and levels of English proficiency would be. EAP courses can of course be adapted to any class size, any field of study, and any level of proficiency—and fields and proficiencies are often mixed—but these variables must be known in advance (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

In the autumn of 2018, an email was sent to the target academic staff to inform them about the course. The only prerequisite was B1 proficiency according to the CEFR. The course description outlined a decidedly generic 40-hour blended course that would be designed based on a needs analysis. The course would aim “to raise participants’ awareness of the rules and conventions of academic writing and speaking in English,” but “the specific genre of writing and speaking [would] be based upon the current research and teaching interests” of participants. The primary content of the course would be an analysis of the “rhetorical moves” (Swales, 2004) common to the chosen genre and the “reader-oriented” style which differentiates academic texts in English from the “writer-oriented“ or “content-oriented” styles typical of other languages (Spataro, 2018). Grammar and lexis taught during the course would likewise be defined by selected genre.

Fifteen participants enrolled for the course, and all fifteen were invited to attend the first lesson, despite the fact that seven were in fact already tenured.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis consisted of three parts: (1) an online diagnostic test to assess participants’ general English proficiency; (2) a focus group discussion, which doubled as a first-lesson icebreaker, to collect data on participants’ backgrounds and motivations for enrolling; and (3) an online survey to determine participants’ preferred genre.

Diagnostic Test

Eleven of 15 enrollees completed the diagnostic test. The results (Figure 1) showed that the general English proficiency of participants varied greatly, and that two had not met the prerequisite.

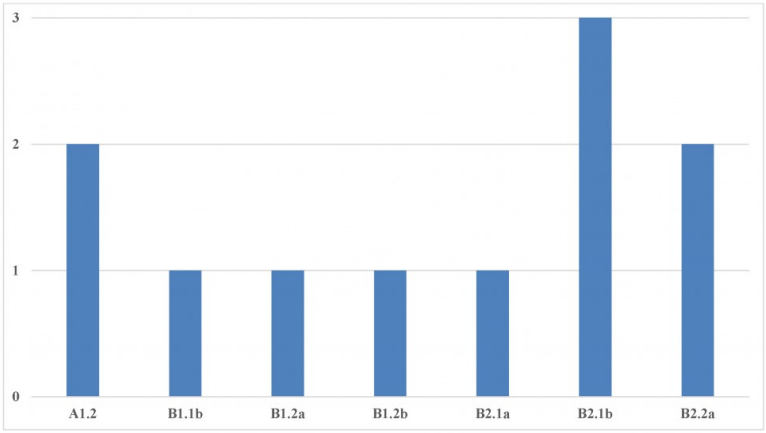

Figure 1. CEFR level of participants. (Click image to enlarge)

Focus Group Discussion

Ten of 15 enrollees participated in the focus group discussion. All in attendance sat in a circle and were asked to introduce themselves, focusing on their nationalities, first languages (L1s) and second languages (L2s), previous experience learning English, fields of specialization and research interests, use of English for personal and professional purposes, and goals for English. Participants were invited to comment upon the responses of others and ask clarification questions. I frequently asked follow-up questions to illicit further information. Themes were recorded as notes.

The responses provided during the discussion revealed diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals. Participants came from three countries—Italy (*n* = 7), Germany (*n* = 2), and Austria (*n* = 1)—and spoke two L1s—Italian (*n* = 7) and German (*n* = 3)—with two Italian speakers stressing that their "real" L1 was their regional dialect. Seven had learned English in school, and three had learned English informally. All had exposure to English in various formal and informal contexts, including study abroad (*n* = 3), university language courses (*n* = 4), exposure during their studies (*n* = 3), and private courses (*n* = 2). In their personal lives, they used English with friends (*n* = 4), to watch TV and films (*n* = 4), with family (*n* = 2), with tandem partners (*n* = 2), to read for pleasure (*n* = 1), and for travel (*n* = 1). For work, they used English to publish (*n* = 9)—some with the aid of a translator, for conference presentations (*n* = 7), as a lingua franca with colleagues (*n* = 3), to review subject literature (*n* = 2), and to teach (*n* = 2). Three indicated never using English in their personal lives, while one reported rarely using English for work.

Their subjects spanned the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, including special education (*n* = 2), social education (*n* = 2), social work (*n* = 2), psychology (*n* = 1), music (*n* = 1), general education (*n* = 1), and geography (*n* = 1)—in addition to an economist and a mathematician not present that day. Their research interests were likewise rooted in diverse theoretical and methodological traditions.

Their expressed goals for English included a general desire to become more proficient/standard/native in academic writing (*n* = 6), publishing (more) in English (*n* = 4), becoming more proficient in giving conference presentations (*n* = 3), networking (*n* = 1), engaging in political activism (*n* = 1), learning to write up quantitative studies (*n* = 1), improving their academic reading skills (*n* = 1), and certifying their English proficiency (*n* = 1). It also emerged that participants were under pressure to publish research articles (RAs) in English-language journals.

A personal observation was that their ability to express their research interests and that most had published in English suggested that their academic English was more proficient than their general English.

Online Survey

It seemed obvious that participants would want to explore the RA genre during the course. But I had some doubts as to whether we could adequately review and practice all features of RAs, and I did not want to restrict participants' options. The online survey therefore first had participants rank their preferences for a variety of written genres and common sections of longer genres. Next, they had to specify which genre they preferred for individual sections. Thirteen of the enrollees participated in the survey. The results (Figures 2 and 3) confirmed my assumption.

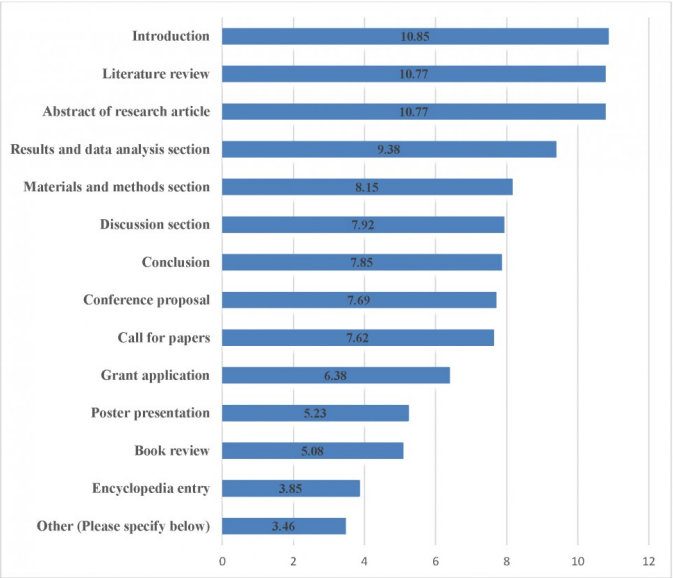

Figure 2. Rank order of preferred genre/sections. (Click image to enlarge)

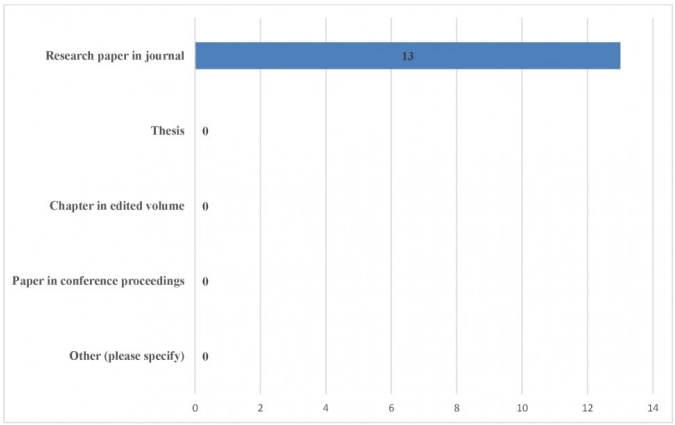

Figure 3. Preferred genre for sections. (Click image to enlarge)

Course Design

The results of both the focus group discussion and the online survey were discussed with participants, and we agreed to work with RA abstracts, introductions, and discussions. We reasoned that the introductions to most RAs included a literature review and description of research methods, and that the discussions often summarized results.

Participants were asked to select two RAs related to their current interests: One in their L1 and one in English. I also located several articles in EAP and TESOL that I thought might provide useful input through form *and* content.

Assessment was defined as follows:

- quizzes on course content (10%)
- student-led mini-lesson on a language topic from *Oxford Grammar for EAP* (10%)
- three writing tasks involving the selected genre (50%)
- oral presentation of a current project (30%)

Most lessons began with a student-led mini-lesson on an EAP language issue selected by the presenter(s), examples being hedging, formal/informal language, tenses, modal verbs, and passive voice. I would then assign a task in which they had to analyze the linguistic features of an RA section that I provided.

For instance, when we explored research abstracts during the second lesson, students worked in pairs to answer the following questions about an abstract from an article that applied move theory to RA abstracts:

- How is the content organized?
- What tenses are used?
- Is the text formal/informal? Personal/impersonal?
- Are there any examples of jargon?
- How is the style different from abstracts in your L1?

Students reported their findings to the class, and I presented an annotated version of the RA abstract as a form of deductive instruction. More specifically, I coded the standard moves found in most abstracts—*introduction*, *purpose*, *methods*, *results*, *discussion*—and marked the tenses used for each move, as well as examples of jargon, personal language, and signposting to illustrate examples of reader-oriented style.

Next, students were asked to annotate the abstracts of RAs they had brought with them before presenting their findings to a partner or the class. At home, they completed an online quiz that assessed their understanding of the linguistic features discussed in class. Finally, they were expected to produce their own abstract for a current or hypothetical research project (or a reworked/translated version of a previously published abstract). These texts were peer-assessed online using a rubric.

This process was repeated with introductions and discussions.

Observations

At the time of writing, the course is still in progress. Informal feedback from active participants has been positive. They have especially appreciated analyzing and annotating the genre. Although most have read numerous RAs in English, and several have published in English, rarely have they explicitly reflected upon the features of the genre. There have been several epiphany moments where they realized a small tweak—changing the verb tense of a sentence, using a signpost, adding a hedging adverb or modal verb, choosing *suggest* instead of *demonstrate*—could have a profound impact on the reception of an RA.

They (and I) have also greatly appreciated the class discussions, which have revealed similarities and differences in RAs across languages, disciplines, research methodologies, and authors. Most important, they have taken great care to integrate insights from the course in their writing and their assessment of their peers.

The biggest challenge has been their busy schedules, which has resulted in modifications to my ambitious syllabus. Two have never attended, two have officially dropped out, and most have missed lessons. Only six have given a mini-lecture; they are behind schedule on writing their introductions and discussions; and we have decided to replace the oral presentation with a small online test to consolidate course content. It has been especially difficult for some to complete homework. Future offerings of the course will have to take work commitments into consideration, but I am convinced that this course could become a regular offering of the Language Centre. I am already planning to repeat the course for PhD students next spring.

References

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Michael Ennis is the English language coordinator at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano's Language Centre. His interests include English for specific purposes, ESAP, content-and-language integrated learning, motivation, and intercultural language teaching.