

# Writing: Learn to Write Better Academic Essays (Collins English for Academic Purposes)

Too chatty: Learner academic writing and register variation

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[DRAFT]

## Abstract

The study reported on in this paper uses corpus data in order to examine how upper-intermediate to advanced EFL learners from a wide range of mother tongue backgrounds perform a number of rhetorical functions particularly prominent in academic discourse, and how this compares with native academic writing. In particular, it is shown that one of the problems experienced by EFL learners is that they tend to use features that are more typical of speech than of academic prose, which suggests that they are largely unaware of register differences. Four possible explanations are offered to account for this register confusion, namely the influence of speech, L1 transfer, teaching-induced factors and developmental factors.

## 1. Introduction

Flowerdew (2001) highlights three areas of difficulty in learner academic writing, viz. collocational patterning, pragmatic appropriacy and discourse features. Collocational patterning has to do with learners' lack of familiarity with the typical lexico-grammatical environment of words (e.g. \*We have *performed* a survey, \*A questionnaire has been *conveyed* to the public). Pragmatic appropriacy concerns the writer's attitude to his/her message, as realised through modal verbs, modal adjuncts, boosters, hedges, etc. Hyland & Milton (1997), for example, have shown that Cantonese learners have considerable difficulty conveying an appropriate degree of qualification in their academic essays. In this paper, we will focus on the third area of difficulty, namely discourse features, and more specifically on "the 'discourse value' of lexical and structural items in context" (Flowerdew 2001: 374) – although pragmatic inappropriacy will also emerge from the analysis, as a consequence of the overuse, underuse or misuse of some discourse features. In particular, we will investigate the extent to which upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English use spoken-like features in their academic prose. While this tendency has already been brought to light for specific

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