TOPIC-TARGETED ACADEMIC WRITING: HOW TO MAKE USE OF A TEMPLATE CORPUS

7/14 PRESENTATION

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Background and rationale

University students are often provided with specialist courses in academic writing.

Writing English for academic purposes requires all students to become familiarized with two key lexical forms:

a) technical terminology and phrases that are usually connected with the topic written about

and

b) words, phrases and key collocations that are typical of the formal register of academic writing.
Aims

◦ Raise students’ awareness of electronic aides available
◦ Develop students’ ability to make appropriate word choices
◦ Develop students’ range of vocabulary
◦ Develop students’ skills in using key words and phrases
PROCEDURE - 1

- Students should work in groups of three or four. They will either have chosen a topic that is of interest and relevant to their studies or they have been given a subject to discuss as part of the composition assignment (here: discussion of a novel by Charles Dickens).

- Students are asked to collect a minimum of five pieces of academic writing related to the research topic.
  - They are asked to use Google Scholar.
  - Texts deemed to be relevant will be downloaded in .pdf format and then reformatted into single .txt files.
  - They are asked to cut the reference list / bibliography however.
Once the material has been collected and formatted, the students are asked to create a separate folder for the .txt files they have. The collection created in this way is their template corpus.
The students are then invited to use the software to create a wordlist (Wordsmith even allows the function of a most frequent clusters)

This, so to look at the key concepts discussed in the texts. It is advised to have a template corpus of no less than 50,000 words.
Taking inspiration from O’Halloran’s (2014) work, the students are next introduced to the use of a concordancing tool.

Some universities will have subscriptions for these. Free alternatives, like Ant Conc and WordSmith Tools 4 or LancsBox exist.

The advantage of using software like this lies in the ability to upload any collection of texts.

Fig. 2: Highly frequent words and highly frequent word clusters
Word Frequency

- These frequency lists highlight an important lexical issue in academic writing, namely
  - (a) its **formality** and **ways to connect ideas**.
  - also (b) **words/phrases particular to the topic**.
- Therefore, students see the use of “nineteenth century”, “narrative” etc.
- They can also clearly see that phrase like “part of the” or “some of the” are used to **describe**
- While “the first time” or “the beginning of” are frequent in academic writing
- Similarly, they notice phrases like “on the other hand”.
The importance of keywords - 1

- A further step students can now undertake requires access to the BNC.
- The BNC-Written has a large number of sub-categories.
- This kind of access allows the students to make comparisons between the words in their template corpus and the wording in a comparator corpus.
The importance of keywords - 2

As the students have created a template corpus discussing fiction, they are asked to make a direct comparison between the template corpus and the BNC-Written-Prose Fiction.

In doing so, an observer can find wording choices that are both specific to the academic research of Dicken’s work and also highlight the use of academic language.

Fig. 3: Selection of keywords in the template corpus (vs BNC Prose-Fiction)
The importance of keywords - 3

- Students select the most relevant of these keywords.
- In doing so, they have to be aware of the author’s and publisher’s names.
- While they focus on lexical rather than grammatical words, they might also notice that TO-INF and nominalisation constructions are quite prevalent.
Caveats

◦ Students who have not used corpora or concordancing tools before might need some extra instruction.

➢ Time must be set aside for teaching basic use skills in compiling a corpus and using a concordancer.

◦ I have asked students to hand in their essay with the key words and key phrases being underlined. For this, I have also asked them to highlight what words are specific to the topic and which are typical to academic discourse.
If time permits: **key clusters**

- Students can also create a word-cluster list for both their template corpus and the BNC subcorpus.
- Figure 4 shows that students should be able to find formulaic phrases that are typical of academic writing as well as relevant technical terminology.
- Students are asked to use the key words and phrases found throughout this session as they prepare their essay.

![Fig. 4: Selection of keyphrases in the template corpus](image-url)
Thank You!!!
References