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SURVEY OF ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH AT THE FINNISH LANGUAGE CENTRES: ESSENTIAL TOPICS, TOPICS TAUGHT AND RESOURCE NEEDS

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Academic Writing in English was one of the seven sub-projects for 2003 funded by the Finnish Virtual Language Centre, which coordinates online resource projects for the benefit of all Finnish University Language Centres. The first phase of the sub-project culminated in a Survey of English Academic Writing at the Finnish University Language Centres. The first aim of the survey was to chart essential topics, topics taught and resource needs of the existing Academic Writing courses in order to define a common core syllabus, which would facilitate benchmarking for future resources. The second aim was to define needs for Academic Writing resources, and the third, to use the core syllabus as a basis for developing materials for the learning of English Academic Writing. In this paper we shall discuss the survey, and its findings and implications for the core syllabus and the creation of a virtual Academic Writing Course in English.

Keywords: English Academic Writing, on-line learning resources

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a survey aimed at the teachers of English Academic Writing at Finnish Language Centres. The survey was carried out by the Academic Writing in English Project as a sub-project, involving collaboration between four Finnish Universities, under the auspices of the Finnish Virtual Language Centre (see <<http://kielikeskus.utu.fi/vkk/osahankkeet.html>>). The Academic Writing Project aims to create supplementary material for use on English Academic Writing courses to support contact teaching. The survey, which formed the initial phase of the project, sought to provide background information necessary for later phases of the project, in an effort to discover and exploit the distributed knowledge and experience of English Academic Writing teachers currently working at Finnish Language Centres.

2 AIMS

The survey had three aims. The first was to create a common core syllabus for English Academic Writing courses, which would provide benchmarking for future resources. Its second aim was to define the needs for Academic Writing resources by determining the actual content of courses currently taught at the 17 University Language Centres in Finland, identifying specific areas of difficulty for Finnish students, and by pinpointing those areas in which most teachers desire further materials for their writing courses. The third aim was to use the core syllabus as the basis for developing materials for the learning of Academic Writing in English, primarily in rtf format, but with the intention of later conversion into formats for work online. Moreover, it is planned that material units should, in subsequent phases of the project, be described in terms of CEF (Common European Framework for Language Teaching) descriptors (see CEF 2001).

3 INFORMANT GROUP

The informants of the survey consisted of 46 Language Centre teachers of Academic Writing in English, most of whom were native speakers of English. These teachers were located by checking the web pages of the Finnish University Language Centres for details of Academic Writing courses. The survey was administered through an Internet questionnaire linked in an e-mail message that was sent to all the informants at the end of the spring term 2003.

4 METHODS

The authors of this paper prepared a questionnaire to discover the teachers' intuitions about what an Academic Writing course should include, what teachers do in their own courses, and in which areas the needs are greatest for web-based materials. The questionnaire (see Appendix, or <http://butler.cc.tut.fi/~penningt/kirjoittamo/kysely.html>) consisted of 43 items concerning macro- and micro-level features of Academic Writing. These covered the following topics: audience and purpose, global features of Academic Writing (AW), paragraphs, metadiscourse, information structure, cohesion, grammar, research functions, style, and miscellaneous items, such as punctuation.

The respondents were asked to choose: (1) up to ten items which they considered essential in Academic Writing courses, (2) the items which they actually included in their AW courses, and (3) items for which they would like supplementary web-based material. In addition, the respondents were asked to specify which Academic Writing genres they were teaching.

5 FINDINGS

The web-based questionnaire was filled in by ticking relevant boxes and returned by 30 of the 46 teachers of Academic Writing, resulting in a response rate of 65%. Of the respondents, 7 were Finnish and 23 native speakers of English. The time of the survey, at the end of the term, may have taken its toll: some teachers might have left the country for their vacation, one or two teachers approached were no longer teaching writing, and several could not be reached by e-mail.

It was found that some respondents neglected to fill in all three of the columns in the questionnaire. Column 1 with the instruction “Tick up to 10 items which you consider essential in AW courses” was ticked by 29 (97%) respondents; Column 2 with the instruction “Tick the items you actually include in your own AW course(s)” by 30 (100%) respondents; and Column 3 with the instruction “Items for which you would like supplementary material on the net” was answered by 24 (80%) respondents.

The replies to the first request for the ten most essential items for an AW course (Column 1) produced the ranking order of the following six items, as shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1. “10 items which you consider essential in Academic Writing courses”.

| Essential topics by percentage of respondents | |
|---|----|
| 1. Discourse markers | 86 |
| 2. How texts vary depending on audience and purpose | 72 |
| 3. Signposts | 72 |
| 4. Research article (RA) structure | 62 |
| 5. Hedging and modality | 59 |
| 6. Move structure of RA sections | 55 |
| 7. Discourse patterns | 55 |

These results may be skewed to some extent since some of the respondents overlooked the instructions and selected more than ten

items. There were also other limitations to the survey. For example, earlier items on the list tended to be chosen more often than those occurring later. Moreover, some items seemed to be ambiguous or difficult for respondents to interpret, thus leading to some possible overlap between the items selected. Furthermore, the questionnaire did not specify the type and length of the AW course, which may also have influenced the results.

The second question regarding what was actually included in AW teachers' own courses (Column 2) produced the following list of the top-ranking items, although all the questionnaire items were included by some teachers:

TABLE 2. "The items you actually include in your own Academic Writing course(s)"

| Topics taught by percentage of respondents | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Discourse markers | 100 |
| 2. Research Article (RA) structure | 87 |
| 3. How texts vary depending on audience and purpose | 83 |
| 4. Formal vs. informal style and lexis | 80 |
| 5. Paragraph structure | 77 |
| 6. Active vs. passive voice | 77 |
| 7. Articles | 77 |
| 8. Tense use in different parts of the RA/report | 77 |
| 9. Punctuation | 77 |
| 10. Signposts | 73 |
| 11. Hedging and modality | 73 |
| 12. Topic sentences | 73 |
| 13. Citing previous research | 73 |
| 14. How to avoid plagiarism | 73 |
| 15. Discourse patterns | 67 |
| 16. Avoiding contractions | 60 |
| 17. "given" before "new" | 57 |
| 18. Reporting verbs | 57 |
| 19. Move structure of RA sections | 53 |
| 20. Combining sentences | 47 |

Thus, in their own teaching, the respondents seemed to focus on global features, such as metadiscourse, research article structure, and the significance of audience and purpose to Academic Writing. Nevertheless, six micro-level items were also included in the top twenty for this question: articles, voice, tense, punctuation, avoiding contractions, and reporting verbs.

As regards the teachers' wishes for web materials (Column 3), the most highly ranked items on the list were articles (suggested by 79% of the respondents), prepositions and punctuation (both suggested by 75% of the respondents). Interestingly, these three items represent local features of language. Table 3 shows the top 15 areas in which respondents perceived a need for supplementary web-based materials.

TABLE 3. "Items for which you would like supplementary material on the net"

| Resource needs by percentage of respondents | |
|---|----|
| 1. Articles | 79 |
| 2. Prepositions | 75 |
| 3. Punctuation | 75 |
| 4. Topical progression | 67 |
| 5. Paragraph structure | 67 |
| 6. Formal vs. informal style | 67 |
| 7. Discourse markers | 67 |
| 8. Discourse patterns | 63 |
| 9. UK vs. US styles | 63 |
| 10. Audience and purpose | 58 |
| 11. Hedging and modality | 58 |
| 12. "given" and "new" | 58 |
| 13. "light" before "heavy" | 58 |
| 14. Verb and noun collocations | 58 |
| 15. Citing previous research | 58 |

As regards the genre of Academic Writing, the majority of the respondents reported that they were teaching the writing of research articles, although Master's and doctoral theses were also taught.

6 COMMENTS BY THE RESPONDENTS

The questionnaire also included a comment box, which prompted 19 of the 30 teachers to provide additional comments concerning the questionnaire. Eleven respondents made no further comments. Several respondents included their specific wishes for web-based materials in the comment box, rather than, or in addition to, selecting items from the list on the questionnaire.

Six teachers mentioned the difficulty of selecting only ten items as the most essential. Six further respondents complained about the shortness of their courses and consequent difficulty in including all the necessary issues in their teaching of Academic Writing. Those respondents offering comments seemed genuinely interested in our virtual project and wished for materials on most of the items presented in the questionnaire.

More specifically, comments from the respondents included requests for web materials dealing with errors specific to Finnish writers, US versus UK styles of writing, different disciplinary conventions, the use and abuse of references, and reporting on quantitative versus qualitative research. Further suggestions concerned the field-specific account of zero articles and materials suitable for CEF C1+/C2- levels in addition to B1/B2 levels. Finally, one respondent expressed the wish that the present project would help to clarify what actually comprises the core of Academic Writing.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The survey produced a fairly clear consensus not only on the ten most essential items on the questionnaire, but also on what teachers do in their Academic Writing courses. A similar consensus prevailed with respect to the areas in which teachers felt there to be the greatest need for web-based materials, with 58% of the respondents selecting

the same 15 items on the questionnaire. Moreover, the survey tapped valuable information and expertise from experienced practitioners of Academic Writing. This data has proven useful in deciding which units to focus on in our virtual English Academic Writing Project. What remained somewhat obscure in the survey, however, was the concept of “core” in Academic Writing. Yet, the high degree of consensus in the reactions of the respondents seems to suggest a tentative list for such a core.

8 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH PROJECT

The survey proved helpful for guiding the selection of areas for the creation of materials in subsequent phases of the virtual project. Thus, initial work has focused on global items on the top of the three ranking lists: discourse patterns; the ordering of information, including topical progression, “given” versus “new”, and “light” versus “heavy”; and signposts and discourse markers. The audience and purpose of writing had featured high in all the three columns on the questionnaire. Therefore, it was decided to include these as a sub-theme for all the units to be created. As regards the local linguistic items, punctuation and article usage have been chosen as the features most urgently requiring supplementary resources for Academic Writing courses.

To complement the survey, nine respondents were interviewed by phone. These in-depth interviews provided more detailed information about the Academic Writing courses, such as the target groups, organization, schedules, teaching and evaluation methods, as well as reference books and other materials used on the writing courses. In addition to new insights, these interviews also confirmed the outcome of the survey: existing courses may vary in their scope and shape, but they are largely similar in their contents and essence.

In parallel with this survey, we have decided on a pedagogical guideline for the web exercises. Unlike many web-based exercises that merely “test” learners’ knowledge of language features, our project will attempt to lead students through a “learning process” that progresses from the analysis of the feature to be taught via recognition and controlled production, leading to free production. This can best be accomplished on the Internet through the judicious selection of specific exercise types at different phases of the learning process and consistent use of feedback. Moreover, principles already presented can be recycled along with subsequent materials in order to ensure the best possible learning results. Current developments in the project can be followed from the “*osahankkeet*” link on the homepage of the Finnish Virtual Language Centre.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for Teachers of Academic Writing

Please tick the appropriate items in the three columns below that best reflect your own situation. Please provide any further details in the relevant boxes. After completing the questionnaire, press the "Submit" button below to send us your answers. Thank you for participating!

Name:

Email:

Institution:

Which academic writing genres do you teach? (e.g., Masters thesis, essays, research articles)

| | Tick up to 10 items which you consider essential in AW courses. | Tick the items you actually include in your own AW course(s) | Items for which you would like supplementary material on the net |
|---|---|--|--|
| AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE Consideration of how texts can vary depending on audience and purpose. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| GLOBAL FEATURES Structure of a research article | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Move structure of sections in a research article (e.g., CARS for introductions) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Discourse patterns (e.g., general-specific, problem-solution, cause-effect) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| METADISCOURSE Signposts to guide the reader through the structure of the text | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Discourse markers (connectors and linking words) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Hedging and modality | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| PARAGRAPH LEVEL Topic sentences | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Topical progression (theme and rheme) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Paragraph structure | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| INFORMATION STRUCTURE "Given" before "new" principle | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| "Light" before "heavy" noun phrases | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

(CONTINUED)

| | Tick up to 10 items which you consider essential in AW courses. | Tick the items you actually include in your own AW course(s) | Items for which you would like supplementary material on the net |
|---|---|--|--|
| COHESION | | | |
| Combining sentences (e.g., subordination of clauses) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Anaphora and cataphora in text | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Repeating and substituting for referents | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| This/these with anaphoric reference | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| GRAMMAR | | | |
| English sentence structure (S+V+O+C+A) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Active vs. passive voice | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Articles: the/a(n)/zero article | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Prepositional usage | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reduced relative clauses | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tense use in different parts of the report | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stative versus dynamic verb use (e.g., overuse of <i>be</i> , <i>there is</i> , <i>have</i>) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Verb and noun collocations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Noun compounds (car brakes vs. the brakes of the car) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Nominalization | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Nonfinite -ing clauses | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| RESEARCH FUNCTIONS | | | |
| Reporting verbs | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Verbs expressing research activity | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Referring to figures | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Citing previous research | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Compiling a list of references | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| STYLE | | | |
| Formal (vs. informal) style and lexis | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Latinate vs. Anglo-Saxon words | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoiding he/she, himself/herself, etc. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoiding sexism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| UK vs. US styles | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoiding contractions | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ellipsis | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| MISCELLANEOUS | | | |
| Punctuation | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Numbers, symbols and abbreviations specific to academic writing | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Titles and section headings | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| How to avoid plagiarism | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

OTHER COMMENTS?