

**ACADEMIC WRITING SEMINAR SERIES for
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS & ACADEMIC STAFF**

Seminar (5)

**Common language problems in
academic writing**



In this session, we will look into some of the major issues in discipline-specific academic writing (in language and education). In particular, we will explore vocabulary and grammar issues with examples drawn from academic writing produced by students in language and education programmes. We will emphasize clarity and appropriateness in academic writing.



Speaker: Dr. Marc Xu

Date: 21 April 2010 (Wed)

Time: 6 pm – 7:30 pm

Venue: B1-LP-06

Dr. Marc Xu

Marc Xu is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, from a disciplinary background in Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Education. He is Associate Department Programme Coordinator of Master of Arts in Teaching English as an International Language (MATEIL). Dr. Xu is also the Principal Investigator of a TDG project on "Developing an Academic Writing Handbook for Students of Language and Education Programmes". He has published book chapters, and articles in international journals including *English Australa Journal*, *World Englishes*, and *Asian Englishes*.

For enquiries, please contact Ms Queenie Chiu
at 2948-7896, email: qchiu@ied.edu.hk

Common language issues in academic writing

Academic writing seminar series for
postgraduate students & academic staff

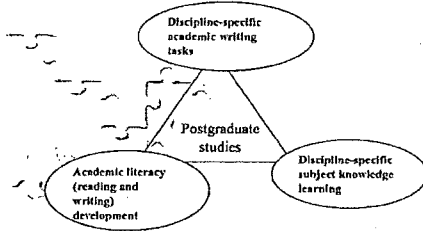
Dr. Marc Xu
6-7:30pm, 21 April 2010

Workshop outline

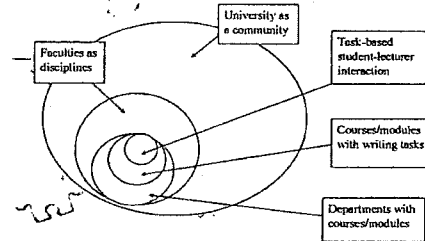
1. Discipline-specific academic writing (language and education)
2. Academic vocabulary & grammar issues
3. Pair/group work

Discipline-specific academic writing (language and education) for postgraduate studies

Learning to write, and writing to learn



Academic writing as a disciplinary discourse community practice



Academic writing is highly discipline-specific

It is important to be aware that academic writing, unlike other genres of writing, is highly discipline-specific. Postgraduate students entering specific disciplines need a specialized literacy, i.e. a discipline-specific way of acquiring new knowledge. What is essentially behind the specialized literacy comprises academic vocabulary and grammar.

2. Academic vocabulary and grammar issues

Classification of English vocabulary

- 1) High frequency words, e.g., GSL (West 1953);
- 2) Academic vocabulary, e.g., UWL (Xue and Nation 1984) and AWL Coxhead (2000);
- 3) Technical vocabulary (Discipline-specific vocabulary), and
- 4) Low frequency words. (Nation, 2001)

Academic vocabulary

Hyland & Tse (2007, p. 249) regard academic vocabulary as a cline of technically loaded or specialized words ranging from terms which are only used in a particular discipline to those which share some features of meaning and use with words in other fields.

Reporting verbs across disciplines

Verbs play an important role in academic writing. Hyland (2008, p. 553) argues that different disciplines have slightly different preferences for reporting verbs.

Discipline	Most frequent verbs
Philosophy	say, suggest, argue, claim, propose
Sociology	argue, suggest, describe, discuss, note
Applied Linguistics	suggest, argue, show, explain, point out
Marketing	suggest, argue, demonstrate, propose
Biology	describe, find, report, show, observe
Electrical Engineering	show, propose, use, report, describe
Mechanical Engineering	show, report, describe, discuss
Physics	develop, report, study

(Hyland, 2008, p. 553)

Pair / Group work 1

- What are the reporting verbs that you usually use in your academic writing?

Our survey on 'reporting verbs' shows that ...

Commonly used reporting verbs by students of language and education majors include: *state, define, suggest, point out, propose, mention, indicate, regard, comment, insist, believe, estimate, pinpoint, say, put*

Experienced writers in 'sociology' and 'applied linguistics' tend to use *argue, suggest, show, describe, explain, discuss, propose, cite, state, claim, consider, point out, call, term, include, report, define, note and caution* (Hyland, 1995, Pickard, 1995)

Observation: Our students seldom use the verb *argue*, while experienced writers seldom use *mention, believe* and *say*.

Common vocabulary errors

Error type	Examples
typos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Morphology stemmed <i>form</i> a Greek word morphé which refers to form, shape. [from]
inappropriate choice of words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To assist in explaining ... few examples are extracted ... to perform a complete demonstration. [a few, or a number of] There are <i>totally</i> eight inflectional morphemes in English. [There are in total eight inflectional morphemes in English.]
misuse of prepositions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> when they are eager to enlarge their vocabulary solely <i>in</i> the basis of the words they have known. [on]
misuse of set expressions/phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>as follow</i>: [as follows] Morphemes can be classified <i>as followed</i>. [as follows]
style or register formality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are meaningless when they are alone. <i>That is to say</i>, ... [In other words, ...] O. Henry <i>once said</i>, 'Most wonderful of all are words, and how they make friends one with each other'. <i>From his words, we can conclude</i> that words are actually interrelated rather than being isolated.

Common vocabulary errors

Error type	Examples
the use of 'etc.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are always ordinary nouns, adjectives and verbs, etc. [and other parts of speech.]
singularity / plurality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... while derivational and inflectional morphemes are <i>affix</i>. [affixes] Free <i>morpheme</i> can be divided into ... [morphemes]
verb inflections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to what Andrew Spencer & Arnold M. Zwicky <i>written</i> on the online journal ... [wrote] Those elements that can stand by themselves as words are <i>call</i> free morphemes. [called] They are known as 'opened' classes of words [open]. There are also 'close' classes of words. [closed]
misuse of parts of speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> morphology has also been used to describe the type of investigation that <i>analysis</i> all those morphemes used in a language. [analyzes] Booij defined "morpheme" as the smallest <i>linguistics</i> unit with a lexical meaning. [linguistic] ... they are not used as <i>frequency</i> as free morphemes [frequently]

Common grammatical errors

Top ten sentence problems (adapted from Raimes 2006, p. 355)

Type of error	Example of error
1. Fragment	She had an ambitious dream. To become a CEO.
2. Run-on sentence or comma splice	The city is lively the clubs are open late. The city is lively, the clubs are open late.
3. Sentence snags (structural inconsistency)	In the essay "Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin discusses his feelings about his father.
4. Wrong verb form of tense	They have never drank Coke.
5. Tense shift	Footie wrote about Shiloh and describes its aftermath.
6. Lack of subject-verb agreement	The owner have gone bankrupt.
7. Pronoun error	The coach rebuked my teammates and I.
8. Pronoun case and reference	When I crossed the border, they searched my backpack.
9. Adjective/adverb confusion	The Diamondbacks played good in spring training.

Common grammatical errors by students of language and education

- 1) the misuse of articles,
- 2) improper modality,
- 3) improper passive/active voice,
- 4) lack of subject-verb agreement,
- 5) lack of number agreement,
- 6) inaccurate reference,
- 7) misuse of tense,
- 8) unclear 'it',
- 9) misuse of -ing form/infinitive,
- 10) improper clauses,
- 11) missing connectives,
- 12) improper possessive forms, and
- 13) negative mother tongue influence.

Strategies for improving academic vocabulary and grammar

Vocabulary

- 1) Explicitly learning UWL and AWL and building up personalized academic word lists based on content subject studies and personal academic vocabulary competence,
- 2) Adopting explicit vocabulary learning strategies, e.g., 'discovery strategies' and 'consolidation strategies' (Schmitt, 1997, p. 206),
- 3) Learning knowledge of word-building processes, particularly derivation processes (prefixes and suffixes).

Strategies for improving academic vocabulary and grammar

Grammar:

- 4) good academic writing comes from good academic reading and research,
- 5) grammatically correct academic writing is often a result of careful revising and editing,
- 6) be aware of the most common types of grammar errors in academic writing, and build up a monitoring mechanism,
- 7) be aware of the importance of grammatical correctness.

* Pair / Group work 2 & 3

Works cited

(Belanoff, Rorschach, & Oberlink, 1993; Byrd & Benson, 1989; Coffin et al., 2003; Cooper & Bikowski, 2007; Coxhead, 2000; Cumming, 2006; Dames, 2007; Dornan & Dees, 2010; Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, & Reddy, 2006; Fox, 1999; Heffernan & Lincoln, 1994; Hyland, 1995; Hyland, 2000; Hyland, 2008; Langosch, 1996; Lea & Street, 2000; Lester & Beason, 2005; Lewkowicz, 1994; Maimon, Peritz, & Yancey, 2005; Millef & Knowles, 1997; Mitchell, 2007)



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