

## TEACHING EAP TO STUDENTS OF HEALTHCARE BACHELOR'S DEGREES: THE CASE OF ACADEMIC WRITING

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**Abstract:** Academic writing is a specific type of non-fiction used by scholars within an academic context. Notwithstanding the different types of academic writing genre forms, the major characteristics of academic writing are generally the same as they include a well-defined, recognizable structure in the IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) format. An essential feature of this type of writing is a formal register free from colloquialisms. In terms of its factual perspective, academic writing is typically centered on its objective, which is often experimental evidence, entailing a clear focus on the research question under study. Profound knowledge of the research article structure, language, and intrinsic features may be conducive to a successful career in the fields of medicine and healthcare. The current paper attempts to investigate writing for academic purposes genre via an analysis of an elective course for bachelor students of healthcare professions in their third and final year of study. Held in 2021/2022 academic year, it was the first of its kind at the Medical College at the Medical University in Plovdiv. The undergraduate students who chose to participate in this course were from the specialties of assistant-pharmacist, dietitian, dental technician, rehabilitator, medical laboratory technician and radiographer. They all shared the same background in EAP, studying it in their first year at college. The academic writing elective course was centered, although not exclusively, on learning to write medical research articles (MRA). The course syllabus encompassed issues such as structure and organisation of MRA, rhetorical moves, usage of language and more specifically knowledge of formal register, hedging strategies, proper word order, editing and revision techniques, publication process. The study tried to gauge students' expectations and performances at base and at end of course. For that purpose, two five-point Likert-type of questionnaires were conducted. The first one tested the students' awareness of the main tenets of MRA writing, while the second aimed at ascertaining the level of course success rate. The study also conducted an initial assessment test and an analysis of the students' performances, as they were required to write an article as their final assignment. The results from the initial diagnostic test showed that all enlisted students were eligible for the course, as there was no one scoring below seventy percent on the test. The course may be considered a success, judging only by its statistics. To delve deeper than that, it must be said that most students were only satisfactorily efficient in terms of the preset criteria. The study shows that the course did seem informative as well as skill-worthy, as the students made a significant progress in the difficult field of scientific writing.

**Keywords:** EAP, healthcare, undergraduates, writing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term academic writing refers to a specific type of prose used by scholars within an academic context (Alliota, 2018:3). Irrespective of the different types of academic writing genre forms, the defining features of academic writing are generally the same as they include first: a well-defined, recognizable structure in the IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) format (Glasman-Deal, 2010:2). Overall, an essential feature of scientific writing is a formal register free from colloquialisms (ibid). In terms of its factual perspective, academic writing is typically centered on its objective, which is often experimental evidence, necessitating a clear focus on the research question under study (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006:17, Bain et al, 2016:5). Clarity of expression is paramount, which entails an accurate choice of words avoiding ambiguity. Finally, yet importantly, any scientific paper must be imbued with such an analytical approach that displays a logical, consequential flow of argument (Bordeaux et al, 2007, Hoogenboom & Manske, 2012:3).

In its turn, the research article (RA) and more specifically the medical research article (MRA) have been the main genre forms in scientific writing whose structure has been largely emulated by all other genre forms: the scientific report, the scientific message, the study, the monograph, the PhD thesis etc (Dagnev, 2020a). Profound knowledge of MRA structure, language and intrinsic features may be conducive to a successful career in the fields of medicine and healthcare. The true insight into academic writing though could first be gleaned since the time authors such as Miller (1984) and Bhatia (1987) turned their attention to genre analysis, mostly in an effort to tackle the problems of written scientific discourse. It was not until Swales' book, "Genre Analysis" (Swales, 1990), however, that the field was put on a firm scientific footing (Dagnev, 2020a). Thus, in terms of structure, it is not only the IMRD characteristics, which are easily learned in practice, but what Swales (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2012) termed *rhetorical moves* that are the real vehicles behind an article development. In terms of language, the idea of *hedging*

is of paramount importance in scholarly writing, as it is both a norm and a credibility strategy (Dagnev, 2020b). The publication process is also a challenge to any young researcher, so its mastering is vital as well (Schimel, 2012:190; Wallwork, 2016:5-7). Thus, the whole process of article production needs careful learning and is mastered slowly and painstakingly (Paltridge, 2004; Dagnev, 2019, 2022a). It is best if it starts early in an undergraduate course, so that the required skills can be acquired by the time the undergraduate student becomes a young researcher.

The aim of the current paper is to discover and illuminate the problems encountered in an EAP course in academic writing to healthcare bachelors and point out possible solutions.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study focuses on the evaluation and assessment of the students' performances in an elective course in academic writing in the 2021/2022 academic year. Sixteen students, from six specialties in their third and final year, enlisted for the course. The undergraduates studied in the specialties of *assistant-pharmacist*, *dietitian*, *dental technician*, *rehabilitator*, *medical laboratory technician* and *radiographer*. They all had the same background in EAP, studying it in their first year at college. A key emphasis of EAP is that English is not taught as a subject separate from the real world (or desires) of learners; instead, it is integrated into a subject area important to them (Dagnev, 2022b). The elective course was centered, although not exclusively, on learning to write MRA.

The course syllabus encompassed issues such as structure and organisation of MRA, rhetorical moves, usage of language and more specifically knowledge of formal register, hedging strategies, proper word order, editing and revision techniques, publication process. The study tried to gauge students' expectations and performances at base and at end of course. For that purpose, two five-point Likert-type of questionnaires were conducted. The first one probed into the students' awareness of the main tenets of MRA writing, while the second aimed at ascertaining the level of course success rate with the students. The questions in both questionnaires were the same, eg:

1. Do you think the medical research article has a clear-cut organisation?
2. Do you think it is of paramount importance to use formal language in MRA?
3. Do you agree that avoiding first person narrative is essential in MRA?
4. Do you agree that grammar is the most important element in writing MRA?
5. Do you think it is easy to publish an article?

Apart from the above-mentioned questionnaires, the study also conducted an initial assessment test and an analysis of the students' performances, as they were required to write an article as their final assignment. The test focused on the students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The pass mark was 70% success score. The analysis in its turn included the following assessment categories: organisation (including proper usage of rhetorical moves), clarity of exposition, appropriate language (including usage of proper hedge forms), and grammar. The analytical scales were from five, being the top mark, to one, being the lowest mark. The articles were assessed as follows (Table 1):

*Table 1. Assessment criteria of medical research articles.*

Category/ Mark	1	2	3	4	5
Organisation & structure	Poor organisation	Some knowledge of organisation, though not up to standards	Relevant organisation	Very good organisation, appropriate knowledge of "moves"	Excellent organisation, proper usage of moves
Clarity of exposition	Lack of clarity for the task	Some clarity is evident, not up to standards	Relevant clarity	Clear, well-defined exposition	The exposition of ideas is excellently presented
Appropriate language	Informal usage, lack of appropriate hedge forms	Evidence of formal register and some hedge forms, but not up to standards	The language is appropriate, but not excellent	Very good language with many instances of excellence	Consistent use of excellent language
Grammar	Inadequate grammar	Some evidence of good grammar, not up to standards	Adequate grammar	Very good level of grammar with some excellent instances	Expert use of grammar forms

### 3. RESULTS

As can be seen from Table 2, most respondents answered positively to Q1 and Q2, which comes to show that they have certain prior knowledge of the language of science. Similar understanding does not spill over to Q3, as half of the respondents express no opinion on the matter.

*Table 2. Combined results from both questionnaires.*

Question/ Preference	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree, nor disagree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	At base	At end	At base	At end	At base	At end	At base	At end	At base	At end
Q1	11	16	2	-	3	-	-	-	-	-
Q2	10	14	2	2	4	-	-	-	-	-
Q3	3	16	5	-	8	-	-	-	-	-
Q4	12	3	3	3	1	2	-	7	-	1
Q5	2	-	3	-	10	2	1	10	-	4

Grammar is still viewed as a ubiquitous factor by the great majority at the beginning of the course, while publishing an article does not evoke any specific response, as perhaps it is too technical a matter to trigger an opinion early in the course. Upon course completion, there are two points worthy of mentioning. The students find it difficult to gauge the usage of first person narrative, while publishing seems to be still terra incognita for them.

*Table 3. Results from the initial assessment test*

Criteria/Percentage	70%-80%	80% - 90%	90% - 100%
	Number of people	Number of people	Number of people
Grammar accuracy	6	6	4
Lexical precision	8	6	2

The results from the initial diagnostic test show that all enlisted students can be considered eligible for the course, as there is no one scoring below seventy percent on the test. If we juxtapose the results from this test with the success rate on the final assignment, we can see that only four people, who have results below 80% in the diagnostic test, did not receive a pass on the final assignment.

*Table 4. Results of the students' final assignments*

Category/ Mark	1	2	3	4	5
	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles	Number of articles
Organisation & structure	2	2	4	6	2
Clarity of exposition	2	2	6	4	2
Appropriate language	-	4	8	2	2
Grammar	-	4	6	4	2

There was not given any overall assessment mark but only “pass” and “not pass”. Mark “three” on the scale was the legitimate “pass” mark. Four articles were not approved, as they did not meet the criteria. Only two articles were entirely in the top mark range. All the other ten articles received satisfactory and very good marks in all criteria.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

It may be presumed that the course has been a success, judging only by its statistics. To delve deeper than that, it must be said that most students were only satisfactorily efficient in terms of the preset criteria. Progress has been made, but those who excelled in the beginning were the ones who obtained the top marks in the end. It may be concluded that the majority of the students became aware of the intrinsic features of MRA, but it takes far more than to become a proficient article writer, as far as language is concerned.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that the course did seem informative as well as skill-worthy, as the students made a significant progress in the difficult field of scientific writing. Yet, it is the first of its kind and in order for it to become a staple on the College curriculum, a certain level of achievement was essential. It is important that those students willing to further their scientific career take such courses, as the latter will definitely facilitate their path in the field.

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