

GOBBLEDYGOOK AND GIBBERISH – PROČ JE DŮLEŽITÉ NAUČIT STUDENTY PSÁT JASNĚ A EFEKTIVNĚ

GOBBLEDYGOOK AND GIBBERISH – WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO TEACH STUDENTS OF EAP TO WRITE CLEARLY AND EFFICIENTLY

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Abstrakt

Mnoho studentů angličtiny věří, že akademický text tvoří především složité větné konstrukce a cizí termíny. Avšak trendem v anglicky mluvících zemích je zjednodušit jazyk. Cíl psaní se proto musí posunout od složitosti ke komunikaci. Úkolem učitele angličtiny pro akademické účely je přesvědčit své studenty, aby psali jasně a efektivně. Předkládaný článek se zabývá problémy v této oblasti ve výuce a jak je překonat. Obsahuje také některé příklady, jak pomoci zlepšit texty studentů.

Klíčová slova

angličtina pro akademické účely, akademické psaní, jasná angličtina, EFL

Abstract

Many EAP students believe academic writing mainly consist of complex sentence structure and advanced terminology. At the same time, the trend in the English speaking world is to make the language more accessible. The aim of writing must be shifted from complexity to communication. The task for teachers of EAP today is to persuade their students to write clearly and effectively. This article takes a quick look at what the problems consist of and how to get past them. It also includes some examples on how to improve the students' texts.

Key words

EAP, Academic Writing, Plain English, ESL

Introduction

Writing in English is a constant headache for university students. Many are just not used to writing, and even those who are often have problems with both the language and the demands of the academic environment. Reading in English often helps very little. Much of what they read in their courses is so badly written that not only the students, but also their teachers, find it hard to understand. Many universities offer writing courses, but these often focus on replicating this complex style. The focus tends to lie at what is usually *seen* as an academic language, like passive voice, long sentences, and complex structure.

What is *gobbledygook* and *gibberish*? The words mean complete nonsense, and this is what many students, and later academic professionals, produce. And it is the teachers' duty to do something about this. Students of EAP need to be taught to write clearly and concisely. If they do not, they will most probably fail in their task to communicate their findings.

This article takes a short look at why this is, and what can be done to stop it. In a way it can be seen as almost a pamphlet. The objective is to argue for the need to teach EAP students clear and effective writing. Writing in a simple and clear fashion is their only chance to communicate efficiently, and therefore they have to learn how to do this.

Student attitudes

At the beginning of the semester I gave my students in non-EAP classes a questionnaire. The idea was to see what attitudes they had to academic writing, and the result was in no way a surprise. 96 per cent of the students thought that academic writing should be more advanced than ordinary

writing. When asked the question “What do you think is most typical for Academic English?” 63 per cent answered “specific vocabulary” and 26 per cent “complex sentences”. “Clarity” was favoured by a merely 11 per cent of the students.

It might be pointed out that the questionnaire was not fully representative. But it still provides a glimpse of the attitudes students have. Academic English, and specifically writing, is often seen as something extremely complicated and difficult, and the students in my survey appeared to have an almost extreme respect for it. But it is not difficult to see where they got their impressions from. Much academic writing is difficult to understand, not only for students. It is true that academic writing sometimes is overly advanced, or even obfuscating (McCarthy, 2006; Plain English Campaign, 2015). Even seasoned academics have problems with the lack of writing skills. Stephen Pinker (2014) claims in his article “Why Academics stink at Writing” that academics “so often turn out prose that is turgid, soggy, wooden, bloated, clumsy, obscure, unpleasant to read, and impossible to understand”. And as Michael Billig (2013) points out, complex academic writing is often defended with the argument that it might be difficult, but at least it is precise. But in reality, it is actually even vaguer than regular English.

The tendency to write this way is still something of a mystery. There has certainly been many theories about it. Dan Sperber (2010) suggests in his article “The Guru Effect” that the mere obscurity of unintelligible academic language is enough to inspire awe, which leads readers to judge things they do not grasp as profound instead of just blaming bad writing. Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry (2014) go even further in their article “The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism” when they argue that obscure and vague language often forces readers to believe that there is a hidden deeper meaning in the text, or even to project their own onto it. These are only a couple of examples, but still illustrate where the debate is going.

A quick glance at what is produced at universities gives support to Pinker's somewhat exaggerated rant, as this extract from Judith Butler's 1997 “Further Reflections on the Conversations of Our Time” shows:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (Butler, 1997)

Even though far from all writing is as bad as this example, the books students read in their courses often create an image of academic writing as something nearly impossible to manage. Of course there are researchers who write well, or even beautifully. But the fact is that many professional academics write badly, and when the students read their texts they think that is the way it should be. The style they are taught through reading their course literature is the base for their impression of academic writing, and if the writers they are made to read are not good enough, they themselves will get lost in the *gobbledygook*.

And this is where the problem lies. Creating an ideal that leads to bad communication is just not an option. But to be able to see just why, it is necessary to go back to the beginnings. The question why their attitude is even harmful cannot be solved without first asking why they should write in the first place.

The aim of communication

These views shown by the students are, as already stated, problematic. The aim of writing is to communicate ideas. We write to persuade, to inform others, to discuss ideas, or to present new

findings. Academic writing does not have any value in itself. It is a tool for communicating, and nothing else. This means that if nobody understands us, we have failed. This might sound obvious, but it is still important to point out, as the questionnaire clearly showed.

Nobody is forced to read what we write. If our communication, and that means writing, fails, our research has no effect. That is what the students need to know, because this has implications on the way we write. Reaching fantastic research results is not enough, but these results also have to be communicated, or else they are meaningless. This means that it is partially our communication skills that define if our research is good or not. And to make it even worse, our written communication is also often part of the requirements for funds, which is one more reason why to start considering how we actually manage this important step.

All of this has already been observed in large parts of the English speaking world. With the exception of a few fields the trend is to simplify. A quick glance at writing guides issued by universities in different English speaking countries demonstrates that it is taken seriously. These guides constantly point out the necessity of clarity and functional communication (just a random pick from the heap: Massey University, New Zealand, University of Wolverhampton, UK, University of Cumbria, UK, University of Aberdeen, UK, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, Harvard University, US; see list of references).

Another problem with traditional academic writing is the fact that many of those who use English are not native speakers. More than 1.5 billion people use English, either being native or not-native speakers, and the numbers are growing. English has become a global language, used all over the world. Many of these users also bring their own contributions to the language, risking to make it even more complex (Crystal, 1997; 2000). English has already established itself as a *lingua franca* for the academic world. Not only is it the language with official status in the highest number of countries, but it has also become the standard for academic journals striving for more than merely regional impact (Genç, Bada, 2010). The risk of misunderstandings is constantly high, since the language users have varying backgrounds, use different versions of the language, and have different expectations. This means that the task of the EAP teacher is to teach students to communicate in a language they do not master perfectly with other people who do not master it perfectly either.

This is not a simple task, but it is manageable. The key is to be clear and efficient. We need to write plain English, making sure to focus on communication rather than complexity. If students are instructed to focus on making the reader understand instead of imitating the books they themselves read, they have a chance to succeed in communicating their ideas. So what is plain English, and how can we teach it?

Plain English

Plain English means to make the text accessible. The idea is that it should be readable for everyone who has interest in it. The term was first coined by the Plain English Campaign, an organisation that started in 1979 (Plain English Campaign, 2015). In the words of John Pease:

Plain English refers to language that is clear, direct, and straightforward. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is language that allows readers to concentrate on the message conveyed, not on the difficulty of the language used. Plain English uses the right word for the right occasion and does not use unnecessary words. (Pease, 2012)

The aim is to make our writing more effective, to popularise and to empower people when reading, and this is usually done by avoiding those elements that usually make texts difficult to understand. The idea that English is developing into an unintelligible language is, however, considerably older. George Orwell was a stout defender of the use of clear language, and in his classic *Politics and the English Language* (Orwell, 1946) he attacked the overly complex and confusing formulations that, if

we look at the examples mentioned above, still today seem to be common in writing.

Simplifying is not necessarily an easy thing to do, especially for those used to the academic *gobbledygook*. There are, however, a few key points that the teacher could focus on. Orwell's recommendations, which he first formulated in *Politics and the English Language*, are as simple as elegant, and can still today be used as guidelines. His six rules of writing should be the start for all writing courses at university, whether for native English speakers or for those who use it as a second language:

- i. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- v. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

(Orwell, 1946)

These rules can easily be complemented with a few very practical, hands-on pieces of advice to make writing an easier task for students:

- Students should be encouraged to use shorter and simpler sentences. This includes limiting the number of subordinate clauses, as well as forcing them to write shorter sentences all together. Under 20 words is fully doable. If a sentence slips over to the third line, they have definitely done something wrong. They also need to be taught that it is very important to be concise. Many students tend to write longer, fairly vague sentences.
- They should use everyday words as much as possible. This often meets with resistance, based on the idea that “it doesn't look academic”. This argument is at the same time also the weakest (Kimble, 2012). It is the ideas communicated that are important, not the level of vocabulary. And in any academic text, the specific terminology necessary will still occur often enough. Students should not be encouraged to “pepper” their texts with it.
- They should learn to use the active instead of the passive. The passive voice is more difficult to write, and more difficult to read.
- Verbs instead of nouns. Avoid nominalisations, i.e. words like completion, arrangement, provision. Instead they should use verbs like to complete, to arrange, or to provide.
- But most importantly: We must always teach our students to focus on the reader. By training them to always ask themselves questions like “What will the reader like?”, or “What will they understand?”, we help them to keep focused.

These recommendations are partially based on the Plain English Campaign, but also come from many years of experience in teaching. Similar recommendations can also be found in many of the writing guides mentioned above. They offer direct, hands-on advice, and help students to produce texts that are both intelligible and easy to write.

Some examples

To show how this can be used practically in class, I have included some examples. The first two are borrowed from the Plain English Campaign (2015). It is not unusual for academic writers to lose themselves in complex terminology. But quite often this terminology can be explained in a simpler way, using everyday words. The same thing is true when explaining facts. The sentence “*the individual member of the social community often receives his information via visual, symbolic*

channels” could just as well be replaced with “*people read.*” The information is exactly the same, but in a plain and straightforward manner. The term “*reflected acoustic wave*” means exactly the same as “*echo.*” These two examples might be somewhat exaggerated, but these and similar formulations do appear in academic writing more than we might think.

The statement “*It has surely been noticed by many scholars that writing can be a difficult task*” is a typical example of when the passive voice has been used for no good reason. “*Many scholars have noticed that writing can be a difficult task*” works better. “*When dealing with hamsters and other small rodents it is essential that the veterinary doctor is trained to proceed with caution*” is perhaps better formulated this way: “*It is important that veterinary doctors have training on how to work carefully with small rodents*”, or even “*Veterinary doctors need training on how to work carefully with small rodents*”. These examples are still quite simple, to some part because they are also fairly short. But the somebody-does-something structure makes the statements clearer, and if the sentences are longer or the ideas discussed more complex, it is even more important to use a clear language.

This somewhat over-worked paragraph, taken from Michael McCarthy's article “Message understood?”, is another good example:

Using large, computer-based corpora linked to databases of socio-geographical information about speakers does, however, give us access to a bird's-eye view of what present-day spoken usage is, and we must surely accept as 'good' spoken English that which is widely attested across speakers of different ages, genders, social and geographical backgrounds, that is to say, our common coinage, the plain, everyday talk of the plain people of the speech community, and not just that of its super-skilful members who command the airwaves and the public platforms. (McCarthy, 2006)

What is wrong with this text excerpt? First of all, the sentence is too long. Actually, the whole paragraph consists of one long and complicated sentence. This means many subordinate clauses which will confuse the reader. There are also some words that we could exchange for others with a more every-day character. The structure itself is also more complex than necessary. I took the liberty to, for the sake of the argument, improve the passage:

We can, however, create a good overview of the present-day usage of English by using large, computer-based text collections and socio-geographical databases. Today, English is used by speakers of many different ages, genders, social and geographical backgrounds. This plain, everyday talk, and not just that of the experts who command the broadcasting and the public platforms, must definitely be considered "good English" too.

This version can hardly be said to be less academic than the original. It is, however, more easily understood. It is also easier to write, which is a great help for the students, who more often than not also struggle with grammar. Exercises that help students to understand what they should do can include organising scrambled sentences, simplifying complex sentences, and completing paragraphs. Students need to practice this, and often.

There is of course a risk that the students' writing will be oversimplified. What they should aim at is clarity, but not for its own sake. The point is to clarify so that the message we try to communicate goes through. If the writing becomes too simple, the message will also be affected. We need to teach the students to write as clearly, efficiently and as simply as possible without distorting the actual message. If, for example, the weather forecast would instead of stating “there is an 85 per cent risk of precipitation over the next 48 hours” say that “it will probably rain the next two days”, they would have distorted the message. The simplifications would make the statement vague. Rather, the language students should learn to write must be concise, and deliver the message in the most efficient possible manner.

This is not surprisingly one of the most common sources of criticism against the use of plain

English (Kimble, 2012). It is, however, a misunderstanding. It is possible to write clearly without the academic gobbledygook. A clear language helps communicating the message, not the opposite. And it helps students to formulate their ideas and succeed in their writing tasks.

Conclusion

To conclude, students have to be taught how to communicate efficiently. But many of the texts they read during their studies fail to do this. This means that teachers of writing need to focus on making their students aware of the pitfalls of what appears to be traditional academic writing. Courses in EAP often focus on traditional notions of academic writing – passive voice, complex sentence structure and so on. But as I have tried to show, this is a blind street which does not lead forward.

By writing a simple and clear language instead we help the students to achieve their writing aims. This includes using verbs instead of nouns, constructing shorter sentences, and avoiding unnecessary complex vocabulary. They need to know why they write and they need to know how to do it in the most effective way possible. This way they will be able to successfully communicate their findings to the world. If they fail, their research results will be meaningless. The task of the teacher, therefore, is to constantly emphasise the need for clear communication and provide tools for how to learn this.

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