

REVIEW OF *EXPLORING ACADEMIC ENGLISH*

Exploring Academic English: A Workbook for Student Essay Writing

Jennifer Thurstun and Christopher Candlin

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Exploring Academic English is an innovative concordance-based workbook for use either in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing class or for independent learning. What makes it innovative is that it is the first workbook to utilize corpus study methods to systematically introduce and explore the use of certain words to perform rhetorical functions in academic written English. Thus, it should be of interest to both native and non-native speakers of English, who have at least intermediate proficiency in English, and who are preparing to enter, or already have entered, tertiary education.

There are two ways that linguistic corpora can be exploited for pedagogical purposes (Partington, 1998): teachers can either analyse corpora for material/syllabus design (Flowerdew, 1993), or they can train students to use corpora directly. The latter use is designed to promote what Tim Johns has described as *data-driven learning*, or DDL.¹ *Exploring Academic English* offers an interesting combination of both methods. The authors have used a specialized corpus of academic English which they first analyzed in order to determine the syllabus of the book, and they have also presented selected output from the same corpus as data for learner activities in which the learner acts as language researcher.

Exploring Academic English is a methodical and clearly presented workbook. Each of its six units deals with a "rhetorical function," as follows:

- stating the topic
- referring to the literature
- reporting the research of others
- discussing processes undertaken in the study
- expressing opinions tentatively
- drawing conclusions

For each function, three or four lexical items are focussed on, with each unit following the same four-stage path. Firstly, in the "Look" stage, a set of concordance lines is presented, sorted by the first word to the right of the search term. In the case of *analysis*, for example, this means that all the concordance lines containing "analysis of" are placed together, and they appear after "...any analysis must ..." (see [Figure 1](#)). As concordances can be difficult to read for first-time readers (key word in context, or KWIC, concordances are incomplete sentences), the learner is advised not to try to understand every word, but rather, to concentrate on the words around the search term.



Figure 1. KWIC concordance of *analysis*

In the second, or "Familiarize," stage, students are given a set of tasks related to these concordance lines, in which they identify lexical patterns around the key word: which prepositions follow the word, and in what contexts; which words commonly precede the word; and so on. They are also asked to decide which of a number of suggested senses the word can have based on the evidence available from the data, and this often involves interpreting possible gradations of meaning. In the third stage, "Practise," students are asked to do gap-fill and matching exercises without referring back to the concordances. Finally, in the "Create" stage, they write a sentence or paragraph on a specified topic in which they practise the use of the key word. In the chapter on "Drawing Conclusions and Summarising," for example, the learner is asked to write a paragraph summarising the main differences between the terms *conclusions* and *summaries* which they have studied in the Look, Familiarise, and Practise stages.

An important point to note is that students work throughout not on concocted examples, but on data drawn from a corpus of authentic academic texts, whether these be concordance lines or the sentences for the gap-fill exercises. Suggested answers to all the exercises are given at the end of the book with commentary provided where appropriate.

The corpus used by Thurstun and Candlin is the Microconcord Corpus of Academic Texts,² an electronic collection of academic books and papers from a range of disciplines, with a total word count of over one million words. The authors first identified words in the University Word List (see Nation, 1990) that could be used in the performance of the specific rhetorical functions outlined above. Using the Microconcord programme, the authors then produced sets of KWIC concordance lines in order to observe frequencies of use as well as the lexical patterning around these words. Finally, they extracted those lines that concisely represent the most common collocational features surrounding the word that had been searched for (a full account of the procedures and the principles underlying them can be found in Thurstun & Candlin, 1998).

Three points are worth making. Firstly, the corpus used is broadly representative of academic writing. Against this, it can be argued convincingly that the texts chosen should have been closer to the types of texts that students themselves will have to write, rather than a collection of texts written by expert writers for a general academic audience, but such a corpus, of sufficient size, was not available at the time that the book was developed. The Microconcord Corpus of Academic Texts is a far more relevant source of data for EAP teaching than any of the large general corpora, and there are, to date, no large corpora of native speaker student-generated academic text publicly available. Secondly, the words included are all what can be termed "semi-technical vocabulary": lexical items that are more likely to appear in scientific or academic than in more general texts, and also likely to appear in a wide range of academic texts. Thirdly, the authors have sifted the concordance lines to reduce the amount of lines that learners will have to look through. One of the criticisms of Data-Driven Learning is that students can be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information if they are asked to investigate corpora by themselves. This workbook circumvents the problem by sorting through the raw data in advance and distilling the output to a manageable level.

I found some of the so-called "Create" exercises, especially in the earlier parts of the book, mechanical, and felt that they were neither creative nor did they test the learner's understanding. In Unit 3, for example, to practise the use of the verb *claim*, the learner is asked to report the following statement (and two others) using *claim*: "Even today, Canadians are not nearly so far away from the tradition of Victorian gentility as we imagine (Waddington, 1989)."

There is no need for the learner to invest any original thought in this exercise in syntactic manipulation. In the unit on "Expressing Ideas Tentatively," the manipulation required is less demanding; the learner is asked to rewrite three sentences, using *may* in order to make the sentences tentative, for example, "This alteration is excitatory or inhibitory: that is, it makes the receiving cell more or less likely to emit impulses itself."

The rewriting involves changing the first "is" to "may be" and "makes" to "may make," which is a simple task and does not require the writer to demonstrate an understanding of what tentativeness is, nor when it is necessary to be tentative. A further problem is that if the learner does think about the sentence analytically, he/she will note that the insertion of "may" does not actually make the statement tentative -- it remains a factive statement, explaining the two (known) types of alteration. In such cases, the teacher might decide to leave out those exercises, and devise their own activities in place of the them.

Generally speaking, though, the book is an excellent implementation of corpus-informed (and informing) insights. Because the concordances are already sifted and are available in a paper format, they are immediately accessible. The repeated use of the four-stage approach also trains the learner in effective corpus analysis skills.

As the authors themselves acknowledge in their article, a possible criticism of the approach is that a great deal of time is invested on a relatively small number of words (19 in all). Learners may well feel that they could invest their energies more profitably in acquiring a larger vocabulary in the same period of time, with a little less depth. For example, the three exponents of one particular function dealt with in the book, that of "Reporting the Research of Others," do not provide sufficient lexical resources for the developing academic writer: "according to," "claim," and "suggest" are a beginning but will soon prove painfully restricting unless the repertoire is supplemented. If this book is to be used as part of a writing course, therefore, learners will need extension activities, so that they can explore other related key vocabulary items for each function. Provided that they have access to appropriate corpora facilities (an academic text corpus of adequate size, with good documentation, and concordancing software), they could be asked to work in groups on different lexical items (hedging words, for example, as listed in the appendices of Hyland, 2000, pp. 188-189) and present reports of their findings to the whole class. A wealth of ideas for using concordancing in the classroom can be found in Tribble and Jones (1990) and in Partington (1998).

It should also be pointed out that a concordance-driven approach is primarily inductive: Learners are invited to look for patterns in the data, and to form generalisations that can account for the patterns they find. Not all learners like such an approach (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 86), and teachers need to consider whether such consciousness-raising activities are appropriate for their learners.

For those who are attracted to such an approach, however, using concordances in the classroom is a stimulating and highly rewarding experience, both for teachers and learners. *Exploring Academic English* makes the use of concordances in the EAP classroom much easier by following a highly systematic approach and presenting sets of ready-made concordance lines, and is an impressive new departure both in the field of EAP writing teaching materials, and of foreign language teaching materials writing in general. It is reasonably priced and can either be used as a classroom textbook (I would see it as most useful as a supplementary workbook), or for self-study, provided that learners are given some training in working with concordance lines first.

NOTES

1. For the definitive bibliography on DDL, see [Tim Johns' Web site](http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/biblio.htm) (<http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/biblio.htm>).
2. Originally sold by Oxford University Press as an optional companion to the *Microconcord* concordancing programme (Scott & Johns, 1993), but sadly now out of print.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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