

THE QUESTION OF DESCRIPTORS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE EUROPEAN LANGUAGE FRAMEWORK: A CRITICAL VIEW

**JoAnne Neff, Caroline Bunce,
Emma Dafouz, Javier Gallego,
Juan Pedro Rica**

Universidad Complutense de Madrid
Edificio A
Ciudad Universitaria
28040 Madrid, Spain
Tel.: +34 91 394 5383, Fax: +34 91 394 5478
E-mail: jneffvan@filol.ucm.es, edafouz@filol.ucm.es,
jgallego@filol.ucm.es, juanperica@hotmail.com

Marta Genís

Universidad Antonio de Nebrija
C/ Pirineos 55, 28040 Madrid, Spain
Tel.: +34 91 452 11 00
E-mail: mgenis@nebrija.es

Anne McCabe

Saint Louis University
Avenida Valle 28, 28003 Madrid, Spain
Tel.: +34 91 554 5858
E-mail: mccabea@madrid.slu.edu

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, with the influx of a great number of students, both native and non-native, with little experience in formal academic discourse, universities in the English-speaking world have become increasingly aware of the need to offer specific instruction in writing skills. This situation required a clearer definition of what the characteristics of this particular type of writing might be (Grabe & Kaplan 1996) and it became apparent that many of the existing teaching materials concentrated overly on normative, grammatical considerations and not on a broader perspective based on discursive competence. Therefore, since the 1990s, there has been more emphasis on the analysis of the rhetorical conventions of various genres, including cross-linguistic comparisons (Connor 1995; Flowerdew 2000; Hyland 2002; Neff *et al.* 2004; Neff and Dafouz 2008).

Because of the utilization of English as a “lingua franca” in the global community (Gnutzman and Intemann 2005) and the growth of student exchange programs within Europe, it has become progressively evident that both students and teachers require a clear set of guidelines, such as those provided by the EU framework descriptors for various areas of linguistic competency. But, as the difficulties experienced by non-native writers of academic English are very genre specific and appear to be largely independent of purely linguistic competency (many native novice writers also find academic writing problematic), the EU descriptors for academic work are too broad for the type of writing that our students must carry out in tertiary institutions.

While much work is clearly being done within universities and colleges to address the prototypical academic writing skills in English, it would be helpful for all concerned if

more specific guidelines could be shared. Thus, one major aim of this study is to draw up a series of structural and rhetorical descriptors and evaluate our students' written production before and after using them in order to test their relevance for our syllabus and perhaps for use by a wider audience in the future.

2. Revising the descriptors for our academic writing course

After one semester of imparting a course in Academic Reading and Writing, the UCM Academic Writing Group began to revise the syllabus for the next year. Bearing in mind both the instruction given and the improvements made by the students (compiled from a comparison of their initial and final written production), the group re-examined the existing descriptors for academic work listed in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (CEFR), to see whether these could supplement our data and help in the drawing up of new guidelines. We found, however, that these descriptors did not provide us with any further specific guidelines, i.e., other than those we had devised for our course.

Using the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) is problematic for various reasons. A major criticism is that the descriptors relevant for academic writing appear in various parts of the book, for example, in the Reports and Essays table (p. 62), but also in the Orthographic Control table (p. 118). As well, some of the descriptors that look like they belong in Reports and Essays (where no descriptors are given for A1 and A2) are actually found in the table for Creative Writing (p. 62), such as the descriptor for A2, which reads: "Can write about everyday aspects of his/her environment, e.g., people, places, a job or study experiences, in linked sentences." Job or study experiences seem to require the structuring of factual information rather than a creative (fictional?) account of past experiences. Our data for students at B1.1 level suggest that being able to write within a "conventionalized format" and "reporting and giving an opinion about accumulated factual information" (listed in the B1 descriptors) are skills that do not *automatically* appear at a certain level of linguistic competence and thus need to receive attention in tertiary institutions at earlier stages, and at least by A2 level.

The Bank of Descriptors for Self Assessment (BDSA), as compiled by Lenz and Schneider (2004), is somewhat more useful for higher education. More descriptors have been made available, since the three sections for writing appearing in the CEFR have been expanded in the BDSA—9 more descriptors have been added to the section of Overall Written Production, 12 more to Creative Writing and 11 more to Reports and Essays. Furthermore, there are slightly more descriptors for the A1 and A2 levels. Nevertheless, Creative Writing remains the largest section and still includes descriptors which could be argued to belong in the Reports and Essays section, e.g. "I can write about my place of work, the different functions of the staff and how the work is organized". The placing of this descriptor in Creative Writing seems to contradict a descriptor for A2 which appears under Reports and Essays: "I can keep a simple logbook about how I carry out a certain task at work".

As far as academic writing is concerned, although mention is made of the text types required (e.g., argumentation, summarising of information from a number of sources), this mostly occurs in descriptors for B2 level and above. Regarding their use as background for drawing up syllabi for writing courses, these CEFR descriptors do not appear to follow a systematic progression (i.e., focus on claims and supporting data) in writing skills from A2 upwards. A further objection could be made about the lack of attention given to the interactive function of academic discourse (Hyland 2005). The Reports and Essays section is classed as a form of production rather than interaction, and rhetorical considerations such as stance and engagement with readers are hardly addressed.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we found that the CEFR descriptors were not suitable for our purposes. However, by analyzing the data from our students' final essays and comparing these with their initial papers, we were able to draw up for future use a list of "can do" statements (see Tables 5 and 6) which are more relevant to our and our students' needs. These statements are related both to what our data show the students were capable of learning from the structural and rhetorical frameworks (Tables 2 and 3) and to what we consider minimum requirements for passing the course. They are therefore the result of both descriptive data and prescriptive criteria.

3. Data and research findings

The data presented here come from a second-year one semester EFL academic writing class, Department of English Studies, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (24 weeks, approximately 72h). Students were tested upon entry for level of English (Oxford Placement Test, 2001), and, as well, a former examiner of the First Certificate Cambridge Examinations grouped students by levels by evaluating their initial compositions. The students were categorized into B1/B2/C1 CEFR levels. At our university, there is no streaming of students by levels and therefore course instructors may find a variety of student levels in the classroom. This means that there must be a series of minimum requirements to be achieved in order to pass the course, but, obviously a student who begins the course with a C1 level is far more likely to receive the maximum grade. The syllabus for the course comprises 6 writing tasks, 4 in-class tasks (30 min.) and two 1000-word assignments (at home)¹. Due to space, the data presented here is from one B 1.1 student's initial and final papers, written in class.

3.1. Data from one student's initial and final texts

Table 1 presents features of a B1.1.essay², written during the second week of class. It illustrates, then, what a student of this level *can do* initially. However, it should be noted

¹ These at-home assignments have been somewhat problematic, since at this level our students are not accustomed to drawing information from sources and later criticizing or accepting others' views. That is, these assignments give rise to a great deal of plagiarism.

² In these tables, *P* indicates a new paragraph and all errors have been recorded as in the student's texts. The structural features are indicated by capital letters, and the rhetorical ones by italics. The left-hand boxes contain the student's text, while the right-hand boxes display the results of analyses carried out by the research team.

that we, as course instructors, are not test evaluators. Thus, we do not seek to place the students in our classes into certain levels or give certificates, according to their results, but rather, as we have a mixed ability class (from B1.1 to C1), we must set the *minimum level* requirements for the B1.1 level.

Table 1. Initial essay, B1.1. student

Some students believe that university degrees do not prepare people for the real world. To what degree would you agree with this belief?	Essay Prompt (an exact copy)
P.1 The actual Educative System is being the MAIN THEME in a lot of debates in our days. Politics and students do not agree because <i>it is truth</i> that a lot of students believe that the university degrees do not prepare us for the real world and for our first job	Contextualization Claim 1
P.2 ON THE ONE HAND, <i>I</i> believe that they have some reason because when you finish your degree really you don't have made anything similar to you be will have to do in your real job. IN MY CASE, FOR INSTANCE, when <i>I</i> finished my university degree which is english filology, <i>I</i> will not have any idea to teach in a school class.	Data 1 Example 1
P.3 ON THE OTHER HAND, <i>I</i> think that we learn a lot of literature and english: <i>so</i> we will be able to make our job really well as soon as we get a bit of self-confidence, because WE HAVE A GOOD PREPARATION.	Claim 2 Contradict Claim 1
P.4 FINALLY, students <i>should have</i> more practise classes and periods in our university degrees, <i>although I</i> think that when <i>I</i> have finished my degree <i>I</i> will have a great knowledges for my new job <i>although I</i> haven't much experience.	Conclusion (repetition of P.3)

As can be observed, this essay has various shortcomings which make it unacceptable for a second-year student of English Philology. Principally, these are: the copying of the essay prompt with no attempt by the writer to appropriate, or take a stance regarding the claim made; unclear argumentation in the form of contradictory claims, which makes this essay appear to be “discovery writing”; an inappropriate authorial voice, i.e., claims and grounds are presented exclusively in terms of personal experience and opinion (overuse of the personal pronoun *I*) and these are often of a very forceful nature (*it is truth that...*); and, finally, the overuse of discourse markers (DMs), which are, as well, fairly trite.

Given these characteristics, typical of many of the essays produced by our students, the course instructors found it necessary to establish structural and rhetorical features (displayed in Tables 2 and 3) which students would be able to incorporate into their writing.

Table 2. Definition for the terms for the structural framework

<p>CLAIMS: A) States the writer's beliefs regarding the topic, usually by re-wording the issue and making a series of sub-claims; B) May also include counterclaims</p> <p>DATA (Grounds): A) Offer more specific information than that of the claim, often with lexical signals (exemplification); B) Constitute why something is the case, often with lexical signals (cause & effect; concession, etc.)</p> <p>CONCLUSION: A) Necessarily occurs in the last third of the text; B) Restates the major claim (should show some sign of knowledge transformation, i.e., not mere repetition) or suggests a possible solution for a problem stated in the claim</p> <p>TEXTUAL ORGANIZATION: A) Displays <i>interactive phrases</i> involved in managing the flow of information (e.g., <i>first, As displayed in Table 5, etc.</i>); B) Uses <i>prospection & encapsulation</i>; C) combines information from different sources based on notes taken in previous reading</p>

Students needed more precise guidelines than those appearing in the CEFR so that they could understand what was expected of them and what the instructors meant by effective argumentation (claims, data, conclusion) and appropriate authorial voice (engagement and stance).

Table 3. *Definition for the terms for the rhetorical framework*

<p>ENGAGEMENT: A) Shows alignment and other aspects of reader-orientation; B) Makes a discriminating use of inclusive WE; C) indicates shared knowledge based on evaluation of audience; D) Makes explicit references to prior texts, especially for the 1000-word papers.</p> <p>STANCE: a) Uses attitudinal (adverbs & adjectives) and other aspects of writer-oriented presentation, such as:</p> <p><i>Impersonalisation</i>: A) Avoids stating claims exclusively in terms of personal pronouns and experiences; B) Uses abstract rhetors (<i>research shows...</i>), passive structures and nominalizations</p> <p><i>Modalisation</i>: A) States claims in uncategorical form (<i>it is a fact that...</i>); B) Uses modal verbs and adverbs as hedges & boosters</p> <p><i>Discourse markers (DMs)</i>: A) Appropriately uses DMs regarding frequency, degree and semantic content</p> <p><i>Evaluative lexical phrases</i>: A) Applies reader-in-the text strategies, implicating the reader in the argumentation process (<i>it is well-known</i>)</p>
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These frameworks were given to the students mid-way through the course³ as minimum requirements for a passing grade and specific exercises were set up in order for students to practice academic reading and writing in accordance with these guidelines. Although only 10 weeks remained in the course, by applying the framework features students were able to make significant strides in their writing skills. In particular, in spite of the persistence of some language errors, the B1.1.final essay (Table 4) shows progress in the following aspects. The most striking structural gain is that the student has now left behind the very unsophisticated strategy of simply repeating the essay prompt, and instead, has demonstrated ownership of the ideas presented as claims and sub-claims. In effect, this represents a movement from knowledge telling to knowledge transforming (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). In part, the student does this by using the hyponym, *controversial theme*, as a pro-jection device (Sinclair 1994) which effectively structures the subsequent text, i.e., each of the major paragraphs deals with the topics of *religious beliefs*, *opinion of the family members* and *moral values*. Regarding rhetorical gains (indicated by italics), this final text reveals a more varied and successful use of impersonalization (*there is a mixture of ...; Some people believe that ...*), modalization (*It could be observe, Although, perhaps, family member...*), DMs (*over all*), and evaluative lexical phrases (*It seems that...*).

In spite of the improvements, there remain some structural problems, e.g., the ‘stranded data’ 4 and 5 might have been more effectively included in previous paragraphs, with Data 1.1. and Data 2.1. However, the student clearly marks the conclusion and offers a modalized general opinion – unfortunately, weakened by using the concessive marker *although* in the last clause.

³ Until that period, the UCM Writing Research Team had not carried out extensive analyses of student texts in order to allow for a clear picture of the kinds of guidelines students needed.

Table 4. Student writing at B1.1 level, Sample 6 for the course (final week)

<p>P 1. Physician-assisted suicide is a CONTROVERSIAL THEME because of a lot of human lives depend on this decision. In this debat, <i>there is</i> a mixture of RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, OPINION OF THE FAMILY MEMBERS and of course, MORAL VALUES. <i>Nevertheless</i>, the theme has become more important in the recent years.</p>	<p>Claim 1 Data 1, 2, 3 (prospection) Mistaken DM Stranded information for Claim 1</p>
<p>P 2. Against the legalisation, the religious beliefs have a big importance. <i>It could be observe</i> how people who have a strong religious education are generally disagree with legalizing assisted suicide. <i>Some people</i> believe that legalizing this type of suicide, this <i>could lead</i> to euthanasia, and more terminally ill patients <i>could decide</i> to dye. <i>People</i> who disagree with this legalisation believe that this kind of patients show a large value of resignation.</p>	<p>Data 1.1.</p>
<p>P 3. OTHER IMPORTANT ASPECT in this debat could be the opinion of the family members. <i>People</i> who agree with the legalization of the physician-assisted suicide, <i>probably</i> consider that this solution would help to relieve families of the burdens of caring for terminally ill relative, because it is very exhausting looking after a ill patient. Although, <i>perhaps</i>, family member who disagree with this idea prefer to look after their relatives for all their lifes. In total, there are an 35% of the people who do not agree with Euthanasia in various European countries.</p>	<p>Data 2.1. Stranded data 4, better placed with Data 1.1.⁴</p>
<p><i>It seems</i> that a lot of <i>people</i> disagree with the legalization, but in Europe more than an 60% of the population agree with Euthanasia. <i>People</i> believe that a terminal ill have the right to control his/her own life of course, if the dead has a justified cause.</p>	<p>Stranded data 5, better placed with Data 2.1.</p>
<p>P. 5 DOCTOR HAS A IMPORTANT PAPER (role) too, because they could be prosecuted for assisting in the suicide, although if the legalization of assisted suicide is approved they could not be prosecuted because this process would be legal.</p>	<p>Data 3 (not previously mentioned)</p>
<p>P. 6 IN CONCLUSION, the dead is an important aspect but, <i>over all</i>, <i>it seems that it is more important the right of the human being to decide about his/her own life</i>, and of care it is more important if they don't want to live, <i>although</i> it is important to consider the opinion of the family members.</p>	<p>Conclusion DM: weakens conclusion (& possible contradiction of previous claims)</p>

4. More specific *can do* statements for academic writing at tertiary level

Although this paper has presented data for only B1.1. Level, this section displays the *can do* statements for both B1.1.and B2 level (Tables 5 and 6), so that the difference between the two can be appreciated and the indications might help teachers to monitor students'

⁴ The term 'stranded data' refers to supporting material which has not been placed in the proper paragraph, i.e., immediately after the relevant claim.

Table 5. *Can do statements for B1.1 level*

Features of structural and rhetorical competence	Qualifications
<p>Structural features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can reword all or part of prompt in response to a writing assignment • Can present previously planned initial claims in an organized way • Can provide some data for claims • Can conclude by restating the major ideas <p>Rhetorical features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can consider other points of view • Can report others' views and statements • Can use simple hedging devices and impersonalization strategies • Can incorporate simple discourse markers as indications of direction of text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some structural limitations regarding placement of information for claims and sub-claims • Some unnecessary or contradictory contextualization • Some 'stranded data' • Some confusing asides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some lack of adopting a critical view in dealing with sources • Some limitations in the use of verbs, i.e. lack of writer stance • Some limitations in range of lexical phrases <p>Some restrictions in range of DM</p>

Table 6. *Can do statements for B2 level*

Features of structural and rhetorical competence	Qualifications
<p>Structural features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can reword the prompt of a writing assignment incorporating opposing points of view • Can present all claims and supporting data in a logically organized way • Can use both prospection and encapsulation to create coherence • Can conclude by restating major ideas and placing the arguments in a wider context <p>Rhetorical features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can consider other points of view, adopting a critical stance • Can report others' views and statements, using verbs which show writer alignment • Can use a reasonably extensive range of hedges and boosters as well as impersonalization strategies in presenting claims • Can successfully use a variety of discourse markers (DMs) to indicate flow of text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper contextualization • Few stranded claims or data • Few limitations regarding lexical phrase used • Suggestion of future events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can distinguish among the arguments in sources • Can use a wide range of reporting verbs (<i>suggest, claim, show, etc.</i>) • Can make effective use of passive voice, modalized utterances, abstract rhetors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can effectively use lexical cohesive devices (synonyms, hyponyms, etc) as well as DMs

progress in subsequent courses. These statements are based on the students' writing at the end, rather than at the beginning of the course, because these represent the structural and rhetorical aspects that students at these levels were able to incorporate into their writing. In the left-hand column of both tables, the structural and rhetorical features appear; these are qualified by limiting or enhancing qualifications in the right-hand column. All of these statements indicate what students who pass are able to accomplish at the end of the writing course. That is, lexical and syntactic competency may remain substantially the same

for most students at the end as at the beginning of the course. However, the discourse competency of students can be improved if specific guidelines are used. The minimum requirements for passing (appearing in the left-hand column) are those set out for a B1.1 student. The qualifications which appear in the right-hand column attempt to indicate to what degree students at B1.1 and B2 levels are successful in their application of the structural and rhetorical frameworks.

5. Conclusions

The frameworks adopted in the Academic Reading and Writing course and the descriptors arising from the student data collected after the application of the framework arose from the practical needs of our instructors and their students. The instructors required structural and rhetorical features which could be used to draw up a set of criteria for measuring the students' written performance throughout and at the end of the course. These criteria enabled the instructors to avoid solely focusing on the elimination of student errors and instead, to concentrate, more reasonably, on feasible advancement in discourse competency. Consequently, the students benefited from a detailed list of features which they could learn to incorporate into their texts in the limited time period of the course. In addition, the can-do statements which were developed after the course had finished are aimed at providing a basis for reworking our syllabus in the years to come. It is hoped that the descriptors suggested here may serve as a starting point for discussing the more specific CEFR descriptors needed for academic writing in the different disciplines.

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DER FERTIGKEITSBEREICH „WISSENSCHAFTLICHES SCHREIBEN“ IM GEMEINSAMEN EUROPÄISCHEN REFERENZRAHMEN: EINE KRITISCHE BEURTEILUNG

JoAnne Neff, Caroline Bunce, Emma Dafouz, Javier Gallego, Juan Pedro Rica, Marta Genís & Anne McCabe

Zusammenfassung

Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, einen Bereich zu analysieren, der im europäischen Referenzrahmen nicht ausreichend definiert, jedoch von zentraler Bedeutung für das berufliche Lernen unserer Studenten ist: der des wissenschaftlichen Schreibens. Die Professoren und Dozenten unserer Forschungsgruppe, die auf diesem Gebiet vor allem in der englischen Fremdsprache tätig ist, halten es für notwendig, den Lernenden klare Anweisungen zu strukturellen und rhetorischen Elementen vorzugeben. Innerhalb der 24 Wochen, die unser Kurs zum wissenschaftlichen Lesen und Schreiben dauert, ist es schwierig, die Kompetenz der Studenten in der englischen Sprache an sich wesentlich zu verbessern, aber, und das zeigen unsere Ergebnisse, können auch Studierende auf der B1.1-Stufe des Oxford Placement Tests (Ergebnis 32/100) von den klaren Anweisungen zum Schreiben profitieren. Das Ergebnis ihrer Leistungen insgesamt verbessert sich bis zum Ende des Kurses erheblich und scheint sich dem B2.1-Niveau anzunähern.

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