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THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE ON A SPECIFIC SUBJECT MATTER AND THE WRITING STYLE

Abstract

The paper is a result of a small-scale research conducted with 3rd and 4th year students majoring in communications and journalism. The basic hypothesis of the paper is that the students' background knowledge in their own subject matter may interplay with their acquisition of the specific scientific language genre. In other words, we wanted to see whether students with better understanding of topics in communications and journalism could more easily articulate their ideas within this field in English, and if so, to which extent. Our focus was on brief report writings in English and the adjectives that the students used in order to generate more expressive messages. Namely, the theory of English for Specific Purposes points out the relevance of learner-oriented courses devised so as to meet the needs of the learners exclusively. On the other hand, we tested the students, who are not fully skilled in their own field of study because they are in the process of learning. The results indicate that there are certain nuances in ESP outcome due either to poor or good knowledge within the scientific fields in question. We assume that this fact may help plan ESP courses because we not only take into account the learners' needs but also their potential to adopt and articulate a certain language genre.

Key words: English for Social Sciences, communications, journalism, adjectives, style, writing

1 INTRODUCTION

As we speak of L2 writing, a source of differences between L1 and L2 writing, according to Cumming (1989), is the writer's relative proficiency in the target language but also the writer's knowledge of the target language genres and associ-

ated socio-cultural expectations (Silva 1997). Furthermore, the aspects of ESP are many – the grammar points necessary to adopt, the selection of appropriate texts to analyze, the subject-typical vocabulary, and the ability to discuss the scientific subject-matter in English. Douglas (2000: 40) explained that "specific purpose language ability results from the interaction between specific purpose background knowledge and language ability, by means of strategic competence engaged by specific purpose input in the form of test method characteristics".

Still, this paper will not deal with the grammar or vocabulary acquisition but the focus should rather be one of the aspects that have not been much discussed - can the learners' knowledge and skills in their own field affect the ESP outcome? In other words, are students, who are better-skilled in their own major field also more successful in ESP production? This question may sound provisional or redundant but the answer to it may help adjust the future ESP teaching process design. "Countless individuals around the world must now gain fluency in the conventions of writing in English to understand their disciplines, to establish their careers or to successfully navigate their learning" as Paltridge and Starfield (2013: 95) remarked. They further make another point that "the ESP literature is coming to understand this and to recognize that the difficulties students experience with writing are often not due to technical aspects of grammar and organization, but the ways that different strands of their learning interact with each other and with their previous experiences" (2013: 97). It was precisely these lines that triggered our study as we attempted to make a connection between the students' writing skills and their total learning process throughout their college years.

In other words, we wanted to see if students with better grades in their own study field could produce better reports in English with reference to the target style, and if they can, to what extent? Speaking of other studies dealing with the background knowledge and ESP interface, Yuyang CAI (2013) performed a research with 2nd year nursing students to investigate if their ESP reading scores are related to their subject matter. Having used the nursing terminology as the key parameter, he came to a conclusion that the background knowledge had a substantial effect on his students' ESP reading performance. Another research was conducted by Ahmadvand & Barati (2013) as they aimed at investigating the effect of background knowledge on the reading comprehension with students majoring in Theology and Psychology. These authors' findings indicated that the background knowledge was not at all a significant factor. They elaborated that the students' general knowledge of English had a greater effect on their ESP reading comprehension than the subject-matter background knowledge. Finally, most recent studies (Yuyang 2013, Ahmadvand & Barati 2013) dealing with background knowledge and ESP outcome focus on students' reading and comprehension skills and vocabulary unlike our study that focuses on the students' writing skills.

2. THE TABLOID STYLE AND COMPOUND ADJECTIVES

The tabloid reports being our target genre, we considered adjectives as the words that may help make the writings sound more bombastic or expressive. The (compound) adjective parameter was used to see if the students took them into account as space savers, which was one of the aspects they had learned in their own major subjects. For the purpose of our study, we checked the course book and syllabus for the *Media writing* module and were informed by the teacher that the students had written a number of tabloid reports covering the space-saving technique. The theory of ESP has tackled many issues such as ESP course organization, learner-oriented text materials, or learner's needs but little attention has been paid to the possible interplay between the students' skills in their own study field and their ability to adopt ESP content to a certain level. Therefore, we decided to focus on students' papers and see to what extent they were able to generate tabloid reports in English. In addition, our center of attention was the style of their reports with reference to the adjective usage. Taking into consideration their background skills and knowledge on writing reports in their mother tongue and the subjects they had previously mastered, we wanted to check if those skills and knowledge can actually affect their writing style in English. As we shall see further on, we took into consideration the curricula of other subjects they had attended such as academic writing and media writing. The work assumption was that ESP course results may depend on the learners' ability to understand and articulate their own background concepts in the communications/journalism subject matter.

Let us first explain why we decided to focus on the (compound) adjective usage in the students' reports. After years of experience in working with communications and journalism students, the author noticed that their writing style in English slightly differs from one student to another even though most of them were excellent English speakers. This was a trigger for this research as we assumed that one of the reasons might actually be how good they were in major subjects. Because of the features of a highly expressive tabloid style, we decided to focus on the usage of highly expressive words, i.e. (compound) adjectives. Also, we considered the fact that the students should be aware of the economy of space criterion, which they had mastered in their earlier major classes. Therefore, our choice of adjectives as the target parameter is not at all provisional as the students have learned, in their earlier classes, about the effect these adjectives may have when it comes to a different writing style.

The subjectivity of language is a general characteristic of tabloids, i.e. the language they use is 'emotional' in order to provoke the readers' strong reactions. The first thing that arises in one's mind as we speak of tabloids is sensationalism,

defined by Collins Cobuild English Dictionary as '...the presentation of facts or stories in a way that is intended to produce strong feeling of shock, anger, or excitement.' While discussing the language of tabloids in his book *Tabloid Britain*, Conboy (2006: 14) concludes that "the use of a range of language specific to a particular newspaper is an editorial strategy, among many others, which enables a readership to be targeted". He further suggests that the emphasis of language only amplifies the polarization which is a characteristic of tabloids. An earlier observation of the tabloid language was provided by Van Dijk (1991: 219) as he wrote about "the use of dramatization, exaggeration and hyperbole which have been described as the main rhetorical tricks of the popular press to make the news more exciting". Still, both authors focus on the general tabloid style and writing techniques, pointing out the exaggeration and expressiveness of the communicated message without focusing on the individual parts of speech and how they may actually affect the tabloid style.

Furthermore, the language tabloids use should at least have some of the sensationalistic features. We aimed at examining adjectives precisely because their role is to describe things and to modify them. This seems to be the only part of speech that might express the strength of a message being sent. In other words, the adjectives are powerful enough to display fine nuances in meaning of the total expression, which is precisely what the tabloids are trying to do. Tabloids need the language that is appealing and captivating so when they write about the celebrities or whatever the subject is, the reader's attention can easily be caught.

In his book *The Language of Newspapers* (2010), Conboy continued his description of the aspects of the newspaper genre and the language used. He focused on the social nature of newspaper language and claimed that "the language the newspapers use, specifically tabloids, over time has adapted to articulate particular variants of language for particular social groups" (2010: 145). We shall add that the tabloids reporting on celebrities are a sort of escape from the readers' everyday life. Hence, we should want to introduce them with the language that is not their boring reality. This may be a good enough reason for the introduction of the adjective compounds as they are not widely used in everyday language. This is why compound adjectives are quite adequate because it is hard to imagine one using words like *photoshoot-perfect* or *porcelain-complexioned* in a daily conversation. Admittedly, adjective compounds indeed are sensationalistic and highly expressive, which is why their usage helps journalists bomb readers with eye-catching and ear-appealing news and reports.

A quite recent study on compound adjectives and the newspaper register is the one conducted by Ljung (2000), who focused on the language of journalism both in American and British newspapers. He noticed that the use of participle compounds in this special language is there for different reasons, e.g. the economy of space, compact information, text cohesion and expressiveness. In line with Ljung's ideas, Vučen's study (2013) corroborated that compound adjectives are particularly widely introduced in the texts of tabloids because of the bombastic, sensationalistic effect they may have on the readers and these compounds are certainly a practical tool to attain such an effect. Tabloid articles are actually short and brief reports leaving more space for fashionable and exclusive photos. Concision is typical of the tabloid style because the news itself is not important and is given less space in comparison with the photographs. It is precisely the photographs that keep the attention of readership, which accounts for the tabloid style brevity. Hence, the (compound) adjective usage is primarily motivated by the need for concise writing.

In addition, the fact that our students had previously managed to interpret a great deal of English tabloid articles in their 1st and 2nd years of study was also taken into account. The modules that covered the interpretation of tabloid texts were *Media writing 1* and *Media writing 2* in their first two semesters. They had also mastered the style properties of one such register such as text cohesion and condensation in these Serbian media writing classes. Thus, we wanted to see to which extent they were actually able to use the adjectives in order to accomplish the *finest final touch* in their reports.

3 RESEARCH DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

The 3rd and 4th-year students majoring in the fields of journalism and communications were the target group of this brief research, the total number of students being 20. The reason why only twenty students were singled out for our research was that there were not many English fluent students at the undergraduate level, whose mother tongue was Serbian. The students had attended ESP classes during the first three years of college and the aim was to train them to read, understand, and discuss their own subject matter in English. As they were all students of social sciences, their curriculum was devised so as to make English one of their top subjects. Furthermore, we took into consideration that, according to their *Media writing 1* and *Media writing 2* curricula, the students had been trained in the tabloid writing style in Serbian.

The fact that was taken into account was that all the students had passed their exams in general English, ranging from B1 to C1 levels. Still, for the purpose of the research, we took into consideration only the C1 students who were fluent in both spoken and written English so we could more easily check our assumption that they were able to produce the finest nuances in the report writ-

ing style. Once we singled out these 20 English speaking students, we took into consideration their grades and knowledge in their major subjects such as media writing, academic writing, and media communications. Namely, these were the subjects that all students had in their curriculum. The next step was to make two separate groups based on their success in mastering the major subjects. This led us towards forming the first group with average journalism and communication students (grades ranging from E to C) and the second group with the excellent students (grades ranging from B to A) but what both groups had in common was the same level of English fluency.

Communications students		Journalism students	
	group II (average communications students)		group II (average j o u r n a l i s m students)

Table 1. The group division of students based on their communications/journalism skills and knowledge

Finally, the testing was divided into two phases. The first phase focused on the report writing and the second phase included asking the students themselves to provide answers for (not) using the adjective (compounds) as style markers.

3.1. Phase 1

The 20 students were first instructed to write two brief reports on their favorite celebrities. Nine were rated as excellent students and eleven were rated as average ones. They were also asked to remember everything they could from their earlier practice, all the reports they had written in their Serbian classes and all the tabloid news they had interpreted in their English classes. Hence, 40 reports of approximately 50 words each were written. Hereby, we shall display three randomly selected full reports for each group so as to demonstrate the students' writings.

Excellent students

At this year's Emmy awards, Shakira showed up with her Barcelona husband. The gorgeous Columbian's next eagerly-awaited album is scheduled for May 15 and the audience cannot wait for her to shine. As we can tell from the photos, her appearance was as attractive as expected. (Report No 1.)

Gorgeous Brad Pitt and his good-looking wife showed up at the latest Oscar awards ceremony. Her breath-taking outfit was clearly from Chanel's latest

collection. As we already reported, the couple still attracts the attention despite Angelina's upsetting loss of weight. (Report No. 2)

Beautiful and blond-haired Gwyneth Paltrow showed her new image at her new movie premiere. Her new role obviously made her so confident and self-determined. This time she chose a dress from D&G latest collection and it was a hit. (Report No.3)

Average students

Madonna never looked so nice and fresh. The moment she showed up at the red carpet, everybody was stunned. Everybody noticed that the latest tour was a success. This time, her adopted son kept her company. (Report No. 1)

This week in London, our photographer caught David Beckham who was so good-looking and did not seem to care about the rumors. According to our last report, the city gossip was that he and his ambitious wife were getting a divorce. (Report No. 1)

Leonardo di Caprio was furious after the last night incident. Paparazzi were chasing him to his house. He later promised to sue them all for ruining his new Porsche. Meanwhile, we give you the exclusive Los Angeles photos. (Report No. 3)

Afterwards, 40 reports were analyzed and the total number of adjectives used by both groups was counted in order to determine the frequency of adjective usage for each target group as shown in Table 2.

	EXCELLENT STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS
Total number of words	738	826
Total number of adjectives	74	58
Total word/ adjective ratio	10.02%	7.02%

Table 2. The number of total words written and adjectives used in students' reports

As we calculated the total number of words used in reports and the number of adjectives, we reached the percentage of 10.02 % for the excellent students group and 7.02 % for the average students group. The excellent students group used more adjectives with reference to the total number of words. Furthermore, we calculated the number of repetitions, i.e. the type and token ratio for the adjectives used in the reports. The figures are displayed in Table 3.

	EXCELLENT STUDENTS	AVERAGE STUDENTS
Token	74	58
Туре	39	26
Ratio	52.70%	44.83%

Table 3. The type/token ratio with reference to the adjectives used in the reports

The results in Table 3 suggest that the average students' vocabulary regarding the adjectives is less variable. In other words, excellent students used not only more adjectives as seen in Table 2 but also displayed a more varied adjective usage. On the one hand, average students did use adjectives but also showed a tendency to repeat the same adjectives more often. For instance, they used *new* and *beautiful* 7 times each. Unlike them, excellent students tended to use a greater variety of adjectives, including a more frequent usage of adjective compounds. The compound adjectives they used were expected except for the *eagerly-awaited* and *1970s-looking* but we later found out that they were used by the students who tended to read a lot of tabloid papers in English.

The extracts from the students' reports may indicate that students with a better understanding of their own subject matter (excellent students) generate more elaborate sentences. Furthermore, if we compare the excellent and the average students, it is obvious that the latter use fewer adjectives and simple sentences. In addition, the excellent students showed more tendencies to use compound adjectives, so after writing the reports each student had to explain why they did or did not use them (which we shall discuss in the second phase). As the selected students were all fluent in English, there were few grammar mistakes. Their sentences were clear and they were all able to express themselves both fluently and accurately. Still, the excellent students did manage (either consciously or subconsciously) to recognize the nuances expressed by the compound adjectives and cared more about the style of their reports. For the time being, we shall assume that it is due to the fact that they were all excellent in their major subjects and had excellent background knowledge on tabloid reports writing. In order to once again check our hypothesis and discover the reasons for these style nuances between the two groups, we shall now describe and discuss phase two.

3 2 PHASE 2

In the first phase we concluded that the students' background knowledge on their own subject matter was connected with the writing style nuances which they showed in their English reports. We wanted to investigate whether these nuances in their writing style were only a coincidence or there were some other reasons, so we decided to ask the students themselves why they did or did not use the (compound) adjectives. For that purpose, we distributed questionnaires asking them to write down, in their own words in English, why they did or did not use (compound) adjectives in their reports. Table 4. shows the answers and explanations of the excellent students.

Question: Why did	you/not use (compound) adjectives in your reports?
Categories of answers	Answers
Reading newspapers in English	 I read a lot of newspapers in English; I actually remember reading that 1970-looking phrase somewhere. (communications student) Reading English papers a lot, I think. I use good-looking a lot, or breath-taking, you know. And I just wanted to use less space. (communications student) I get newsletters from some tabloids; I like to be in touch with what's going on. I remember reading some adjectives I never new actually existing, like pearl-complexioned, I know I read it somewhere. (journalism student)
Recalling previously gained knowledge	 We discussed adjectives in our first year. I guess it is how to make a stronger expression. I am not sure, but I actually did not use any of the compound adjectives, right? (communications student) In our media writing classes we discussed how to make a stronger phrase, you know, to make it sound more bombastic. And, of course, in tabloids we take care about the space, you know, to say more things with fewer words and stuff. (journalism student) I just wanted to use fewer words, not to write too long sentences. I remember using compounds for saving space in our earlier classes. (communications student)

Targeting concise writing and tabloid style	 I just wanted to be more practical, I guess. I think I cannot skip the adjectives. I used them a lot in my Serbian classes, with the tabloids, you know. (journalism student) I think I wanted to sound like a tabloid writer, you know, to use a lot of attributes (not sure if this is the term in English). (journalism student)
Cannot decide	• Ups did not think of that, but I am using words like beautiful, horrible, and stuff, that's all. (journalism student)

Table 4. Excellent communications and journalism students' explanations on (not) using (compound) adjectives

Initially, we should say that the explanations provided by the students themselves are provisional and should be interpreted with precaution. We only aimed at their answers in order to get an idea what we may or may not use as a guideline for future class organization. Of all the excellent students, only three did not use compound adjectives. As for the others, what their answers had in common was the fact that they obviously capitalized on their previous knowledge in some major subjects. Furthermore, they tend to be well-informed and they read newspapers in English just to keep up. These excellent students obviously pay more attention to their writing style, the results of which were highly expressive sentences in English. On the other hand, Table 5. shows the answers of the average students and their explanations.

Question: Why did you/not use (compound) adjectives in your reports?	
Categories of answers	Answers
Focusing on the sentence structure	 I just focused on short sentences I believe. (communications student) I focused on my sentences, not the words, I guess. (journalism student) I read a lot of magazines but I always thought it was about the correct sentence not the words and stuff. (journalism student)

Recalling previously gained knowledge	 Well, I did read tabloids in English; In English classes I think, and I did use one compound, good-looking, actually. (communications student)
Did not consider style and expressiveness	 Well, now that you mention it does sound good but I just did not consider the nuances if that is what you mean. (communications student) Did not think of it really. (journalism student) I use a lot of adjectives to describe people and things, but not many compounds. Did not think of the expressiveness. (journalism student) I did use adjectives, you know, but did not think of the style. I always just write what comes to my head. (journalism student) I did use beautiful two times. But these compounds they use, I simply did not think of that. (communications student)
Generally not successful at writing reports	 I did not have really great grades in Serbian when I wrote reports. (journalism student) I never really liked writing reports. (journalism student)

Table 5. Average communications and journalism students' explanations on (not) using (compound) adjectives

Having analyzed the average students' answers, we came to the conclusion that they were less prone to reading newspapers and magazines in English so as to improve their own writing skills. Naturally, it is our task to teach them and help them improve their writing. Still, students' inner motivation does indeed play a significant role in their learning process. In addition, none of the average students mentioned their major subjects and knowledge they had gained in those classes. They showed good language awareness but little style awareness. Even though this question parameter we used may seem conditional and subjective, it did help us get some information we needed in order to get some perspective on what the

reason for the adjective usage was and to which extent the students themselves cared about the expressiveness of their reports.

We have already said that students who are more familiar with and better understand their major subject field in their mother tongue should be able to better articulate their knowledge in English. Taking into account their reports and explanations, we may conclude that the excellent students capitalized on their previous knowledge and skills. They actually tended to read more and liked to be well-informed, which was one the reasons they were able to recognize the nuances and use words such as compound adjectives in order to make their reports sound more expressive. On the other hand, the average students showed poorer understanding of the style nuances. One of the reasons for the tabloid style failure might be exactly the fact that they actually had poorer knowledge and skills in their major subjects.

4. DISCUSSION

Our small-scale analysis did not try to fight the facts about the student-oriented teaching system; rather, we wanted to see whether ESP course planning can be improved by taking into account learner's specific knowledge about their own subject matter.

The trends in ESP courses are mostly learning-centered, aimed at meeting the specific needs of the learners. However, learner-oriented courses should take into account not only the needs of the students but rather the **possible outcome** and the **students' ability** to adopt any type of knowledge, including language skills. When it comes to ESP at the academic level, our brief research showed that attention should be paid to outcomes of one such course in terms of students' background regarding the subject matter.

Independent from previous studies on reading and vocabulary acquisition, this writing-oriented approach to ESP teaching and the interaction with the background knowledge was an attempt to find new tools that the ESP teachers should be aware of. If we assume that the background knowledge of the subject matter may affect the writing skills of the students, then it is upon us to be a bridge between the students and their results. In other words, once their English is satisfactory, we should want to start paying attention to nuances.

One of the main ideas of ESP is that it has been founded on the fact that we all use language as members of a certain social group. This further indicates that ESP is more concerned about communication instead of language. On the other hand, each ESP course planning must admittedly consider the learners' abilities

and skills not only when it comes to language but also when it comes to their own background target subject knowledge.

Namely, despite the fact that all the students in question had the same knowledge in ESP and English in general, the more skilled students' essays indicate that the background knowledge in the subject matter does indeed affect the final outcome of the idea articulation. Admittedly, the discrepancy between the groups was not so large. As we had expected, they all generated few grammar and functional mistakes. On the other hand, those students who had best grades in other major subjects apparently used their background knowledge so they could write more authentic reports. In future, these facts could be taken into account when devising an ESP teaching plan because what we can expect from students in the end may, to a certain extent, modify what we can present them in the first place.

What all students had in common was that they all understood their instructions and produced linguistically correct reports. As we had expected, the language itself was not a problem for any of the students. Still, only those who were better in their own academic field had no difficulty producing the nuances in the style of our target register. They were resourceful enough to remember their previously gained knowledge in their major classes and used it skillfully to produce the highly expressive and bombastic phrases typical of tabloid style.

5 CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

Students' knowledge within their major field could be one of the keys to organizing ESP courses because only then could we suppose what language skills we can expect them to adopt and eventually master. Can the students' background skills in their own major field interplay with their ESP acquisition? It is mostly certain. Eventually, students' motivation and background knowledge in other subjects is not something that English teachers can control or influence. As we have seen, adjectives are a target part of speech due to their ability to express the finest nuances in meaning and help express the more bombastic messages. Those students who had scored better in their major subjects were able to recognize the relevance of using such words. In addition, our choice of adjectives as the target parameter was not at all provisional as the students had learned, in their earlier classes, about the effect they may have when it came to a different writing style.

The theoretical implications of our study for the English for Social Sciences may be the fresh ideas regarding the ESP curriculum. In other words, we may want to consider adjusting the curriculum depending on the students and their potential. Sometimes, as it was the case with the students we had tested, the teacher

needs to change the perspective and consider teaching them something outside the curriculum. The writing style was not included in their ESP curriculum but our assumption was that their English skills and background knowledge indicated the necessity to teach them more. The pedagogical implications of the study are much stronger. In order to improve the ESP curriculum, there is a necessity to run an extensive study that would encompass the interaction of the background knowledge and all of the students' skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). Furthermore, we may want to explore how the efficient writers coordinate their background knowledge with other language ability resources such as their general language knowledge and strategic competence (generating ideas).

Apart from the questions most often set forth in the process of ESP courses, we should ask ourselves: 'What can students expect from us and what can we expect from students?' Only when we try answering the latter, can we start improving ESP courses. The facts remains that ESP should be learner-oriented but it is upon us, the teachers, to try to anticipate which outcomes and goals are possible to expect.

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Nevena Ž. Vučen

MEĐUSOBNI UTICAJ OPŠTEG POZNAVANJA ODREĐENE OBLASTI IZUČAVANJA I NAČINA PISANJA

Sažetak

Rad je rezultat manjeg istraživanja koje je sprovedeno sa studentima treće i četvrte godine komunikologije i žurnalistike. Polazimo od pretpostavke da znanje koje studenti stiču iz svojih užih oblasti može da utiče na usvajanje određenog jezičkog žanra. Drugim riječima, željeli smo da vidimo da li studenti koji su bolje savladali teme iz komunikologije i novinarstva mogu lakše da artikulišu sopstvene ideje na engleskom jeziku i do koje mjere. Rad se usredsredio na kratke izvještaje na engleskom jeziku i pridjeve koje studenti koriste kako bi poslali što snažniju poruku. Naime, teorija jezika struke ističe značaj kurseva koji treba da se usredsrede na učenike i isključivo ispunjavanje njihovih potreba. S druge strane, testirali smo studente koji su još uvijek u procesu izučavanja sopstvene uže oblasti te njome još nisu potpuno ovladali. Rezultati su pokazali kako postoje određene nijanse u ishodu nastave engleskog jezika usljed boljeg ili lošijeg studentskog ovladavanja sopstvenom oblasti izučavanja. Pretpostavka je da bi ova činjenica mogla da doprinese planiranju kurseva engleskog jezika kao nematernjeg budući da bismo u obzir uzeli ne samo potrebe učenika nego i njihov potencijal da usvoje i artikulišu određeni jezički žanr.

Ključne riječi: engleski za društvene nauke, komunikologija, novinarstvo, pridjevi, stil, pisanje.