From words to text – academic writing in EFL classrooms

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Abstract

This article will take its point of departure in the following questions:

- Why work with academic writing and CLIL in EFL classrooms?
- How to support the development of EFL students' academic writing skills through a focus on a CLIL approach, subject-specific vocabulary, meaningful text production and authentic audiences?

Today's children are both learners of language and users of language in the learning process (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). Theory on modern language teaching revolves around how to make academic writing authentic, meaningful, and motivating for schoolchildren to help them become competent text producers (Hyland & Tse, 2007; Gibbons, 2009; Nagy & Townsend, 2012, Thise & Vilien, 2019)

The article will be organised around a discussion of the potentials of working with CLIL (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010), vocabulary development and authentic academic communication (Henriksen, 2019) where language teaching functions as a means of developing children's academic writing skills across subject-specific content areas. The focus will be put on how to bridge the gap between vocabulary learning and text production and how to communicate effectively with peers in authentic academic contexts.

After this theoretically founded introduction to the above key issues, findings deriving from the NCFF project "Building More Vocabulary – Building More Communicative Competence" will be unfolded. Emphasis will be put on vocabulary learning in relation to the increasing requirements of a larger and more nuanced vocabulary outside everyday colloquial language in today's societies. This to support children's ability to become future partakers of the international dialogue about important global challenges.

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Keywords

CLIL, subject-specific vocabulary, academic writing, authentic communication

1. Introduction: Working with academic writing and CLIL in EFL classrooms – why?

Most of today's young learners possess a language for everyday communication, which is a solid basis for developing their linguistic and communicative skills when it comes to school-related language such as the more academic and subject-specific language (Gibbons, 2009, p. 50; Gibbons, 2015, p. 25).

According to Angela Scarino and Anthony J. Liddicoat, language teachers of today need to regard school children not only as learners of language but also as users of language (2009, pp. 52-53, p. 73). Their main reason for proposing such a view is that language teaching is no longer restricted to working with inventories of language items but with what the students can accomplish in real-life communication. The focus has changed because of the increased role that social media and the use of ICT play in the life of young learners.

Today it is possible, easy and accessible for young learners to create and participate in immediate interaction with others about issues that they find important, entertaining and relevant (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p. 56). It may be a challenge for learners and teachers to create similar conditions within the language classroom, so it becomes meaningful to learn a language (Pedersen, 2019, p. 55-56). Perhaps it may be an even greater challenge to create such conditions when working with the development of children's academic language and communication skills.

The question remains why it is so important to try to meet the challenge of teaching and learning academic language and communication skills. The answer lies in e.g. the English curriculum of the Danish school that argues for the need to become democratic citizens in a global world where a large vocabulary offers far more opportunities for participation in relevant communicative contexts (BUVM, 2019a, p. 30, p. 43, p. 45; Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010, pp. 4-5).

The increasing requirements for language users of today to possess nuanced language competences have made it urgent for the language teacher to make the learning of academic and subject-specific language relevant and meaningful (BUVM, 2019a, p. 43; Stæhr, 2019).

In an NCFF funded project on how to develop students' academic writing skills in both English and German in the Danish school, the focus was put on meeting the challenge of working with academic writing in ways that appeared meaningful and authentic to the students. Another challenge manifesting itself during the project was that the students of English had an everyday language that could be used as a point of departure for learning the more academic and subject-

specific language as opposed to the students of German who experienced that they did not possess an everyday German language in advance.

In the following, we will present some examples from our project on how to work with academic writing meaningfully through the use of a soft CLIL approach and a focus on the learning of subject-specific vocabulary in the language classroom (Larsen, S., Daryai-Hansen, P. & Holmen, A., 2016, pp. 54-55). However, our article will be initiated by a theoretical discussion of how to work with the bridging of a focus on academic and subject-specific vocabulary and academic text production in meaningful ways.

2.   The development of EFL students' academic writing skills – how?

According to the main learning and teaching objectives for foreign languages in the Danish school, the idea is for students to become aware of the use of strategic competence when communicating (BUVM, 2019a, pp. 44-45; BUVM, 2019b, p. 35). This approach is challenged by our project where the idea is to be able to use a precise and nuanced language with the use of subject-specific vocabulary as opposed to getting your meaning across with the language you already possess. A finding of the project is that the teacher needs to put a specific focus on academic vocabulary as it forms a basis of and bridges the way to academic literacy (Henriksen, 2019, pp. 213-215; Henriksen & Jakobsen, 2013, p. 52; Gibbons, 2009, p. 50). In other words, academic vocabulary functions as a scaffold when the students are to read and write subject-specific texts. The teacher needs to put a consistent focus on academic vocabulary because it is a complex vocabulary that can be difficult to understand as it is abstract and appears in academic texts across disciplines (Henriksen & Jakobsen, 2013, pp. 51-52). To give a few examples, academic vocabulary are words such as the following: *analysis*, *factors*, *principle*, *structure*, etc. (Coxhead, n.d.).

The main challenge in learning academic and subject-specific vocabulary is that it is used for "convey(ing) abstract, technical and nuanced ideas and phenomena" (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92) and therefore not very frequently encountered outside the context of the school and educational curriculum.[1] As pointed out by Nagy and Townsend, "[a]cademic language is the

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[1] See Hyland & Tse (2007, p. 236):
1. High frequency words such as those included in West's (1953) General Service List (GSL) of the most widely useful 2,000-word families in English, covering about 80% of most texts.
2. An academic vocabulary of words which are reasonably frequent in academic writing and comprise some 8%–10% of running words in academic texts.
3. A technical vocabulary which differs by subject area and covers up to 5% of texts.

specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content" (p. 92). On top of that, academic vocabulary and the specialized vocabulary specific to school-related disciplines hold various characteristics that make them differ from everyday language and, hence, difficult to learn. Among those characteristics, Nagy and Townsend mention the following:

- Latin and Greek origin
- Morphologically complex words
- Nouns, adjectives, and prepositions
- Grammatical metaphor, including nominalizations
- Informational density
- Abstractness

    (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 93)

In sum, academic and subject-specific vocabulary is both low-frequent, abstract and complex. In order to bridge the gap between this somewhat complex vocabulary and how to put it into use, students need to work with content that is relevant to them. Similarly, teachers need to provide authentic contexts where the students communicate their findings and new knowledge to someone to whom it matters – someone who may interact with them and may answer back. The question is, then, how and with what it can be done and accomplished in the language classroom.

    Consulting the theory on the teaching and learning of academic vocabulary, one will find various recommendations based on the research and theory of vocabulary learning. According to Mary J. Schleppegrell, teachers add the new language related to the academic genres and texts of school to the existing language that the students already use (2012, p. 414). The students need to be guided in the use of academic and subject-specific language. Likewise, Schleppegrell (p. 410) points out the importance of providing opportunities for the students to become aware of academic language and for using such language. In addition, students need simultaneously to work with the understanding of the words of a specific academic topic along with the understanding of the content of the topic. To sum up, students need to work with the knowledge about a topic in order to work with and understand the knowledge behind the words. On top of that, the students' vocabulary learning needs to take place in multiple authentic communicative contexts in order for them to create a bridge to their own text production. So, it requires a tight focus on content, production and context that comes across as authentic and meaningful for the learner

(Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92, p. 97, p. 98; Townsend & Collins, 2009, p. 996). A tall order for the teacher to handle, as our project also revealed. On the basis of this, our proposal is to adopt a content and language integrated (CLIL) approach in the language classroom to forge the link between academic content, academic vocabulary and academic text production (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010, p. 1).

A CLIL approach is an obvious choice because it gives a different experience of learning a language and because of its focus on discipline-specific content. Furthermore, CLIL is an approach that highlights the need to work with academic content and academic language simultaneously in order to support students' learning of *both* content *and* language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010, pp. 1-2). In our project, the emphasis was mainly put on the development of the students' academic and subject-specific language skills while the development of their academic knowledge functioned as a stepping stone for learning the language related to the subject in question. This may be called a soft CLIL approach (Ikeda et al., 2021; Larsen, Daryai-Hansen & Holmen, 2016, pp. 54-55).

3. Scaffolding – how and why?

A recurring challenge for language teachers is to bridge the gap between working with academic and subject-specific vocabulary and using this vocabulary for academic text production. In order to meet this challenge, one of the findings of our project was that the vocabulary that the students need in order to write their texts is also the vocabulary that needs to be consistently scaffolded, as also pointed out by Schleppegrell (2012, p. 410). The teachers and students in the project worked with different themes within the disciplinary areas of science and cultural studies such as food waste, sustainability, plastic in the oceans and metropoles. The students were to make texts in such genres as informational and infotainment videos, information reports, homepage entries, blog posts and Instagram posts with a real audience in mind such as local and global peers. Therefore, it became of vital importance that the vocabulary that had to be scaffolded was field-specific as well as genre-specific.

For example, one of the English teachers used a scaffolding activity in which the students were to work with a number of keywords taken from a text about sea pollution (e.g., *throw away world*, *debris*, *litter*, *consumer*, *current*, *impact*) and where they were to explain the meaning of the words to each other, read the text containing the words and write sentences with the words.

Another English teacher worked with the theme "the plastic problem", taking her point of departure in one of the UN's global goals and provided the students with handouts containing examples of genre-specific chunks as a way of scaffolding their writing of informational texts. Among these chunks, the following were introduced: *The main cause of the problem is…*, *The fact is that…*, *The problem is that…*, *The danger is that…*, etc.

Although the cited chunks do not strictly meet the criterion of frequency that underpins Averil Coxhead's definition of academic vocabulary and her list of academic words, they may still be argued to serve the function of initiating students into the register of academic writing. In the first place, the chunks are highly likely to appear in academic texts and, for that reason, could perhaps be termed semi or pre academic vocabulary. A second reason for categorizing the cited chunks as academic words or phrases derives from the argument proposed by Danish researcher Anne Sofie Jakobsen that if the principle of frequency is used as a criterion for identifying academic words, there is a risk of eliminating important academic words from academic word lists (Jakobsen, 2018, pp. 169-170).

Both of the learning activities mentioned above are examples of scaffolding that is meant to enable students to use subject-specific and academic words in different types of informational texts on a homepage aimed at peers. In a similar fashion, it also became apparent that the vocabulary learning activities must have a close relationship to each other and to the text product that the students are to make. Otherwise, the purpose of learning academic and subject-specific words tends to disappear for the students.

4. Awareness raising – how and why?

A pivotal scaffolding element of the teaching design was an activity aimed at raising students' awareness of different categories of vocabulary used in texts, especially in academic texts. The students were told that they were to work with different words and expressions often met in academic texts because they were to write similar texts for a homepage or for an Instagram channel for peers to benefit from. The aim of the activity was to make the students aware of different kinds of words and how they are used in academic and non-academic contexts. They were told that they needed to come across as experts when writing their texts and that this was the reason for them to have a fairly competent knowledge of which words to use as an expert writer. For that reason, they were introduced to the above mentioned awareness-raising activity where the words to be studied were divided into the following four categories:

- general vocabulary (= det generelle ordforråd)
- academic vocabulary (= det akademiske ordforråd)
- pre-technical vocabulary (= det før faglige ordforråd)
- technical vocabulary (= det faglige ordforråd) - this is what we have referred to as subject-specific vocabulary in this article

    (Jakobsen, 2018, pp. 26-29)

Below you will see an example of an awareness-raising activity:

Rules of the game – for the students

You are to negotiate where to put the words and phrases handed out to you. Use the blue sheet, the yellow sheet, the green sheet and the red sheet of paper to help you figure out where to put the words and phrases.

Explanation of the colour coding of the game:

- You are to find the **general** words and phrases and place them on the blue sheet of paper.

    They are words and phrases used in all kinds of texts.

- You are to find **academic** words and phrases and place them on the yellow sheet of paper.

    They are words and phrases that you use in many different academic texts no matter which topic.

- You are to find the **pre-technical** words and phrases and place them on the green sheet of paper.

    They are words and phrases used in all kinds of texts – in both non-academic and academic texts.

- You are to find the **technical** (i.e., subject-specific) words and phrases and place them on the reed sheet of paper.

    They are words and phrases that you only use within texts covering a specific subject area.

You may use the above overview of the different categories of words and phrases while working with the game.

Any text may be used for selecting words and phrases for the game. Below, you will find an example of a model text that could be used. Some of the words and phrases of the text have been colour-coded to show the reader how it could be done.

Model text:

Around the year 2030, 10 years, 259 days and 10 hours away from now, we will be in a position where we will set off an irreversible chain reaction beyond human control that will most likely lead to the end of our civilization as we know it. That is, unless in that time permanent and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society have taken place, including a reduction of our CO_2 emissions by at least 50 per cent. And please note that these calculations are depending on inventions that have not yet been invented at scale. Inventions that are supposed to clear our atmosphere of astronomical amounts of carbon dioxide.

(Thunberg, 2019, pp. 28-29)

The main purpose of the above activity is the students' awareness raising and not a matter of finding the correct answer. It may come across as a difficult task, but it is the negotiation among the students about the categorization of the words that is the aim of the task. The activity is meant to help the students identify the appropriate vocabulary when they read texts and especially when they write academic texts.

In order to personalize the words for the students and give them ownership to them, they had a personal dictionary for the words to go into. The function of the dictionary was to help the students remember the words and the categories they were placed in when writing their own texts. They revisited the dictionary continuously when working on their texts for their homepage and their Instagram channel. It turned out that this awareness-raising activity and the use of personal dictionaries became of great importance to the students in their writing of academic texts even after the end of the project period. For instance, two boys discussed their outlines for their upcoming exam and used the academic and subject-specific terminology from their personal dictionaries for improving the taxonomic level of their outlines. As one of the boys said to the other while looking at his text: "You need more 'red words' (*technical words*) to make your text better". The outcome of the awareness-raising activity had turned out to be that the students had a tool for scaffolding each other's subject-specific vocabulary when working with academic

text production. The German teachers of the project made a dictionary shared by the whole class (*Klassenwörterbuch*) as means of mutual instead of individual awareness raising and personalizing the academic and subject-specific words.

5. Meaningfulness and authentic communication – how and why?

Apart from the scaffolding of and awareness raising in relation to the learning of academic and subject-specific vocabulary, another important aspect of supporting the development of students' academic writing skills is the teacher's establishing of contexts that offer the students opportunities to use this type of vocabulary for authentic communicative purposes (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92, p. 97, p. 98; Townsend & Collins, 2009, p. 996).

One example from the project involved the use of the digital communication medium Instagram where the students were asked to write posts for an Instagram channel about food waste (*Lebensmittelverschwendung*). The students were young learners of German with little experience in using the language for real communication outside the classroom. The posts were meant to be real communication for the benefit of others and not just exercises in practising the German language. The medium and the genre of the Instagram post helped the students come across as competent users of the German language. Typically, the Instagrammer will post an image accompanied by a short caption including hashtags to convey a certain message. The communication in the students' Instagram posts was both simple and complex because as food waste Instagrammers they wrote fairly simple sentences interspersed with advanced and very field-specific vocabulary such as in the slogan "Hör auf, Essen wegzuwerfen – kaufen Sie nicht zu viel Essen" and the hashtags "#Lebensmittelverschwendung", "#Lebensmittel" and "#Fleisch". The meaningfulness of posting messages on the Instagram channel and commenting on others' posts provided the students with a semi authentic context for academic communication and motivated them to stretch their language.

The project showed that the integration of vocabulary learning with academic writing is of importance for students to stretch their language from an everyday register to a more academic one. It also turned out that the students learn academic and subject-specific words as fast as they learn general words as long as the activity involves authentic communication and proper scaffolding. This also goes for young and inexperienced learners (Balle, Olsen og Pedersen, 2016).

6. CLIL and a cross-curricular approach – perspectives

The findings of our project have given rise to a number of perspectives:

- to learn academic and subject-specific vocabulary and to produce academic texts, there has to be a real communicative need for the students to use such vocabulary and write such texts,
- the integration of digital communication media in language teaching offers the students opportunities for authentic academic communication, e.g. with students locally and globally,
- a stronger focus on academic language acquisition and text production across language and non-language school subjects is an avenue to supporting the development of students' academic linguistic and textual competences.

To return to our point of departure of this article and the project behind it, the overarching goal of placing emphasis on developing language students' academic textual and linguistic competences is to empower them in the process of becoming legitimate participants in the democratic debate about e.g. global issues.

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