

# What written academic genres do veterinary pathologists suggest for EAP students?

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## Abstract

English is the language of research and scholarship as attested by the bulk of scientific articles published in international journals and by its adoption in scholarly meetings and in higher education. In countries where English is a foreign language, the role of English as a contact language must inform university syllabi and language lecturers should aim at familiarizing students with the academic genres pertaining to their field of study. To date, Veterinary Medicine has not attracted analysts' attention and is an underrepresented field in Genre Analysis studies. To fill in part this gap, a survey was conducted among a group of veterinary pathologists – considered as a community of practice – on the academic written genres to be used in university curricula. Results, shared to call attention on English as a foreign language education in Veterinary Medicine, show that respondents deem case-reports and monographs the genres to be used in English language courses; additionally, some respondents highlighted that language teachers should develop presentation skills to give talks at international conferences.

**Keywords:** Veterinary Medicine, academic genres, lingua franca English, discourse analysis.

## Resumen

*¿Cuáles son los géneros académicos escritos que los veterinarios sugieren a sus alumnos de inglés académico?*

La lengua inglesa es la lengua de la investigación y la erudición, como así lo testifica el grueso de artículos científicos publicados en revistas internacionales y su uso en reuniones académicas y en la educación superior. En aquellos países en

los que el inglés es la lengua extranjera, los programas docentes universitarios deben tenerlo en cuenta y los profesores de lengua deben conseguir que los alumnos se familiaricen con los géneros académicos pertinentes en su ámbito de estudio. Hasta la fecha la medicina veterinaria no ha sido objeto de atención por parte de los investigadores lingüistas y tiene poca representación en los estudios de análisis de género. Para cubrir en parte esta carencia, se ha realizado una encuesta entre un grupo de veterinarios (entendidos como comunidad discursiva) sobre los géneros académicos que a su juicio deben implementarse en los planes docentes universitarios. Los resultados demuestran que los informes de casos y las monografías constituyen los géneros que deben utilizarse en los cursos de inglés y, junto a esto, que los profesores de lengua deberían desarrollar destrezas que guarden relación con las presentaciones orales en congresos internacionales.

**Palabras clave:** medicina veterinaria, géneros académicos, inglés como lengua franca, análisis del discurso.

## Introduction

State of the art in Applied Linguistics reckons the role of English as the international language of science and of scientific communication (Sano, 2002; Jenkins, 2007; Hyland, 2009). This function is widely documented by the bulk of scientific articles published in international journals and authored by non-native speakers, by its use in international symposia and as the medium of PhD theses and of university post-graduate courses in many European countries (Ferguson, 2007).

In publishing, this tendency has long been studied and results show that in the biomedical field English has reached a predominant role. Researchers have, in fact, stressed that the number of scholarly articles written in English shifted from 72.2% in 1980 to 88.6% of published papers in 1996 (Benfield & Howard, 2000) with an exponential increase along the years that is now attested well beyond the 90% threshold (Hyland, 2009). The rationale behind the “success” of English in academic settings can be ascribed to institutional constraints asking for the widest visibility of results within the international community (Swales, 2004; Hyland, 2009) and to the need of information access, data storage and results retrieval from online databases and scholarly indexes (Tardy, 2004), a goal easily obtained by the worldwide use of a common language shared by speakers of different countries and linguistic backgrounds.

The role of English as the language of scientific communication asks for a change in contemporary ideas on its value: proficiency in English is not an optional accomplishment but it is necessary to access texts, to write and to communicate research results among peers (Ferguson, 2007). This concept of text accessibility is of paramount importance for educational purposes since non-native speakers professionals are required to make use of a literature increasingly published by the English medium. This means that in English as a foreign language (EFL) countries, university syllabi should consider not only general linguistic proficiency – in terms of basic grammar and basic written and spoken communicative or interactional skills – but should also aim at developing field specific literacy. This should be pivoted on the written practices – that is on the genres –, which define a given academic community and its writing conventions acknowledged by its members to provide and spread information (Swales, 2004; Hyland, 2007). The genre-based pedagogy offers EFL students many educational benefits as it can lead to proficiency in the foreign language itself by raising rhetorical awareness of the written texts (see Tardy (2006) for a review); this last ability can help learners locate information when reading for study purposes and can assist content-knowledge transfer beyond the language classroom (Tardy, 2006) to develop some textual schemata for the world of work (Hyland, 2007).

## The survey

The impact of “anglicization” in publishing is well documented in many scientific fields, and educational materials are available to EFL practitioners lecturing on English for academic purposes (EAP) in fields such as biology, business, chemistry, economics or medicine (see Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Swales, 2004; Hyland 2006). To this author’s knowledge, little attention has so far been paid to the impact of English in Veterinary Medicine and little is available on this branch of medicine to help English language practitioners shape university courses for veterinary doctors. The only existing data on the use of this language among vets and on some genres pertaining to the veterinary field are those published by CIVR (*Comitato di Indirizzo per la Valutazione della Ricerca*), and the results from a survey among the faculty members of an Italian university (Cianflone, Macrì & Mazzullo, 2009).

CIVR is the Italian Research Review Body appointed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research to evaluate the activity of the Italian scientific community. The committee asks Italian researchers, from academia and from national research bodies, to confer data on their scientific output along a given period. Results from this survey offer a snapshot of the quality of the Italian scientific productivity organized around 20 different disciplinary sectors, from Aeronautics to Medical Science (CIVR, 2007). The figures for the agricultural and veterinary field depict a situation where more than 95% of results are published in English with a strong inclination for journal articles (CIVR, 2007), without any further specification on the type of written texts (that is, research papers, reports, review articles, editorials or case-reports) chosen by veterinary scholars to spread results.

The second study on veterinary medicine in EAP contexts is an investigation implemented among the members of the Department of Public Health of one faculty of Veterinary Medicine (Cianflone, Macrì & Mazzullo, 2009). Respondents, all academics specialized in different disciplinary veterinary sectors, were asked, via a written questionnaire, to indicate the most important academic written genres for future vets. Results showed that the case-report, the research article and books, with a 37%, 25% and 24% of preferences, respectively, were considered the most educational genres.

The role of English as the *lingua franca* of international scientific communication highlighted by the above mentioned surveys has a strong impact on veterinary students' education because data suggest that proficiency in English can serve two purposes: to acquire independent access to the English-medium literature for study purposes – that is to read English texts for an exam or for the end-of-course dissertation, and to develop reading skills to keep in touch with the latest medical trends or up-to-date literature once in the profession. In other words, the two surveys indicate that an important educational objective is to consider students as “consumers” and/or “producers” (Tardy, 2004; Hüttner, 2008) of the academic English texts related to the writing practices of the veterinary community. To reach this educational goal, that is to shape language courses tailor-cut on the needs evidenced above, the discussion should involve an analysis of the genres peculiar to the veterinary field, as stressed by current practice in EAP education in university settings (see Jordan, 1997; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Basturkmen, 2006). Results are better achieved if help from field specialists (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) is sought – that is, from those facing this “anglicized” trend in their everyday practice.

Outcomes from this search are highly wished for in the literature concerning the organization of language courses based on specific educational needs, because hints from the inside can assist in developing courses truly shaped around learners' necessities (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Moreover, this type of collaboration can avoid what has been called the "language teacher dilemma" (Wu & Badger, 2009) when dealing with content topics far from language teachers' education, typically revolving around English language teaching theories and practice, as can be the case of veterinary English.

To elicit the written genres peculiar to the community of veterinary pathologists to design a syllabus in line with the globalised requests of academia, that is to make students consumers and/or producers of academic English texts, and because of the lack of studies in the EFL/EAP literature specifically devoted to the veterinary field, some academics of one Italian Faculty of Veterinary Medicine were consulted. To this aim, all the members of the Department of Veterinary Pathology at the University of Messina, considered as representatives of a community of practice, as indicated by Swales (2004), were interviewed on the issue of lingua franca English and on the specific written genres pertaining to their group and used by them to communicate findings.

The notion of community of practice is very important in today's globalised research settings, since any community consists of a set of people using language to achieve common interactional purposes like the exchange of information, the spreading of results or the reporting of work-in-progress (Swales, 1990 & 2004). Communities, as evidenced by analysts, tend to develop their own interactional style, consisting of a sort of slang made up of abbreviations and acronyms, together with linguistic collocations and connotations (Swales, 1990), circumstantiated by the use of specific written and oral practices typified in written and spoken genres (Swales, 2004; Hyland, 2007 & 2009). These genres should be recognized by language teachers and exploited in their EAP classes to let future practitioners be active members of their communities.

## **The questionnaire**

To gather the data for this pilot study, the face-to face interview was deemed a suitable means of enquiry because a direct approach is likely to produce a relaxed and fruitful atmosphere among respondents involved in students' education but not aware of EFL teaching issues.

The questions were of three types. The first aimed at outlining the personal involvement of the subjects with lingua franca English; it, therefore, consisted of general questions on the respondents' status inside the faculty, on study or exchange visits abroad, on the number of papers published in English in international peer-refereed journals and on attendance at international meetings with English as the official working language. The second part of the interview aimed at eliciting the informants' opinion on the language skills to be developed in courses in tertiary settings, namely spoken or written language expertise, reading and comprehension of academic texts and pronunciation skills. The last part, and the core of the research, replicating the only available questionnaire on veterinary EFL teaching practice, discussed in Cianflone, Macrì and Mazzullo (2009), asked interviewees to indicate the most suitable academic genres to be exploited for veterinary students, namely case-reports, research articles and monographs.

Prior permission was asked to the Director of the Department, who was informed on the scope of the research; the matter was discussed in a Department meeting and formal authorization to proceed was granted. Respondents' anonymity was guaranteed to all participants as the main aim of the research was to consider answers as the expression of ideas from a whole group of academics on the issue of English as the lingua franca in the scientific domain.

## Results

No quantitative data are given here because they are outside the aims of the survey and because of the limited number of respondents; nevertheless, considering the small sample and the preliminary feature of the research, important insights were obtained from this pilot survey among the members of a circumscribed community, never interviewed before on such topics for EFL and EAP educational purposes.

As concerns the Unit of Pathology, this section consists of three professors, four researchers and many post-graduate and PhD students. These last two groups were not considered in the survey because given their learner position, that is as academics/practitioners to be, their ideas on lingua franca English would not be regarded as full-grown enough for the research purposes. Therefore, the surveyed sample consisted of the seven academics forming the backbone of the Unit.

From responses to the first question, the unit is very active on academic research and publishing in English with a mean average of 70 works printed in international peer-reviewed journals. The younger members were abroad for study purposes in foreign research institutions of outstanding importance to complete their education and they all attend international conferences, both as speakers and as chairmen, on a regular basis. For the present research goals, this involvement in using English on-the-field, both in Italy and abroad, implies that their answers were sustained by a direct linguistic concern and have, therefore, a strong face value to define the language needs of a small community whose research efforts are strongly rooted within the globalised group of veterinary pathologists.

The results of the second question evidenced how all the interviewed pathologists deemed reading and writing the most important skills to be developed in EFL classes. This result is not surprising as this behavior probably mirrors the respondents' practices revolving around access to literature in English for research purposes and the dissemination of findings in the same language. Pronunciation was not considered at all, while the spoken skill was indicated by two respondents only and was connected to the ability of presenting a paper at international meetings.

As regards the academic written genres to be exploited for educational purposes, that is the last question in the survey, case-reports and monographs ranked the highest, as they were indicated by all respondents. The other genre in the list, that is the research article, got a lower preference because it was considered a written type to be used in PhD courses.

The two most preferred academic genres emerging from the present pilot survey resemble those outlined in a similar staff assessment elicited for science students at a South African university (Jackson, Meyer & Parkinson, 2006) where the written forms suggested by the academic professionals were laboratory reports and books. The former was considered a good medium to exhibit the knowledge acquired at lectures and through the suggested reading of the course. Considering the results from the South African report and those highlighted by the investigation among the members of the Department of Public Health (Cianflone, Macrì & Mazzullo, 2009), the written academic genres elicited in the present survey are foreseeable because pathologists as a community center their medical research activity on the study of cases and are accustomed to compare and to contrast their findings with monographs or previous cases discussed in the literature. As a

consequence, they are used to unfold their results through case-reports and, therefore, deem this medium of paramount importance to future veterinary practitioners.

## Discussion

Clear educational suggestions for language educators working in university contexts emanate from this pilot survey among veterinary pathologists: case-reports and monographs are the genres to build language courses on to increase EAP proficiency and to foster the acquisition of the written genres peculiar to a given community of practice. Results are not surprising since case-reports are considered the cornerstone of medicine (Vandenbroucke, 1999). As a genre which examines a case, or a number of cases, and describes clinical praxis and decision-making, it ensures an important educational message, because this written academic text-type summarizes past and present care and suggests gaps by sharing innovative management plans (Aitken & Marshall, 2007) or groundbreaking techniques whose application can later be used in human medicine. Case-reports, therefore, have a strong educational value in present day evidence-based medical practice, both for students and for medical practitioners as part of their life-long learning. Monographs, on the other hand, are the means by which the basics of a discipline can be acquired as they embody disciplinary “truths and current areas of professional activity” (Hyland, 2009: 114), and, therefore, are considered important educational devices to build field specific knowledge in terms of basic disciplinary concepts and scientific methods pertaining to a given community (Hyland, 2009).

An interesting issue emerged from the present survey is the attention to be paid to oral expertise in English. Although indicated by a minority of respondents, and strictly related to international conferences, the presentation skill should not be put aside by any language course designer, because conference attendance plays today an important role in the spreading of research findings. Symposia, in fact, are a common means to unfold results within the community of peers, thus claiming one’s own research space and territory (Ventola, Shalom & Thompson, 2002; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005).

## Conclusion

The context of this survey, while acknowledging the worldwide share of English for some veterinary pathologists, originated from the need to define the educational objectives of English language courses for veterinary students in EFL countries. The present research is not without limitations which mainly have to do with the small number of respondents and the local environment from which it originated. Findings are, nevertheless, important as they are the first to provide both general and specific insights to be developed by future research on EAP teaching issues in specific EFL educational contexts. As concerns the former, this study is the first to have elicited responses from non-native English speaking veterinary pathologists – as members of a well defined community of practice – on the role this language plays in their research activities and how it impacts their academic proceedings. The latter insight mainly regards the written genres to be used in EAP veterinary courses, namely case-reports and monographs. Further studies will ameliorate the overall knowledge of pathologists' point of view on lingua franca issues and should involve a larger sample of informants, possibly from different EAP institutions and from different EFL countries.

[Paper received 8 July 2011]

[Revised paper accepted 10 December 2011]

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