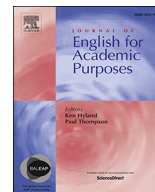




ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap)

# Student use of imperatives in their academic writing: How research can be pedagogically applied

John M. Swales <sup>a</sup>, Justine Post <sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Michigan, 500 S. State St., Ann Arbor, MI, United States

<sup>b</sup> Ohio Northern University, 525 S. Main St., Ada, OH, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 November 2017

Accepted 28 November 2017

Available online xxx

### Keywords:

Imperatives

Academic writing

Disciplinary variation

Corpus analysis

Research-based pedagogy

Teaching materials

## ABSTRACT

This paper is a contribution to the “Research into Practice” genre recently established by the journal in order to highlight the pedagogical applications of EAP research. The research in question is taken from a recently published paper (Neiderhiser et al., 2016) analyzing senior undergraduate and graduate student use of imperatives in their academic papers. Much of the paper consists of a sequence of tasks (to be done in class, online, or for homework) derived from the 2016 study, along with a rationale for the pedagogical decisions made. The sequence opens with rhetorical consciousness-raising activities, moves on to various kinds of micro-analyses to be carried out by the students, and closes with some editing tasks.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Many readers of this journal are EAP practitioners and as such engage in research into practice activities as they prepare class or on-line teaching materials. They may use as starting points findings from articles, from books like *Disciplinary Discourses* (Hyland, 2004), from the *Longman Grammar* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999), or from corpora of various kinds, not excluding their own. They may also have conducted some research themselves which they now want to exploit pedagogically. If these practitioners are also involved in ESP teacher education, they may be asking their students to engage in small-scale research into practice (RiP) materials. Matters, however, become a little more uncertain when we are faced with the task of exemplifying and illustrating in some generally useful way how *the process* might actually work out. Obviously, the choice of topic can be tricky. We need to find something relatively straightforward and circumscribed, but still relevant and interesting. We want something that will have wide applicability for a range of potential users from around the world. So, for example, there is a case for avoiding an illustrative RiP scenario that targets a complex issue for a specific group (for example, intonation problems of Francophone scientists when presenting in English). Another issue is the desired level of specificity and practicality. Is there a need to “go down the line” and produce actual teaching materials that might be directly imported, with perhaps minor modifications, into classrooms? Or is this obvious overkill and largely redundant for experienced ESP practitioners, even if it might be helpful for beginners in materials production?

As the title indicates, we have opted for a restricted feature of academic writing—that of the occasional use of imperatives. The employment of imperatives makes direct appeal to readers, while at the same time being shorter and “snappier” than its alternatives. For example, consider the following possible formulations:

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jmswales@umich.edu](mailto:jmswales@umich.edu) (J.M. Swales), [j-post.6@onu.edu](mailto:j-post.6@onu.edu) (J. Post).

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| Imperative  | Compare the figures in the two columns.             |
| Passive     | The figures in the two columns can now be compared. |
| Conditional | If we compare the figures in the two columns.       |

So, the choice of an imperative or not is closely connected with audience analysis, focusing on whether using the “command” form might be offensive to some readers. As for the second issue, Elsevier EAP/ESP journals in recent years have very rarely included “end product” materials, but the RiP genre would seem to require such specificity.

## 2. The research base

In 2016, we (along with three others) published a research article on the first half of the above title in *Applied Linguistics* (Neiderhiser, Kelley, Kennedy, Swales, & Vergaro, 2016). The data used for this project came from the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers, or MICUSP. This corpus consists of over 800 A-graded papers anonymously submitted by University of Michigan students in their fourth and final year as undergraduates and by students in one of their first three years of graduate education. The papers ranged from argumentative essays/response papers to research reports/complete research papers. Excluding references, the total corpus adds up to something over two million words. MICUSP is free and can easily be found with a search engine like Google.

Fortunately for this project, MICUSP is particularly useful for exploring disciplinary variation. It is also good for comparing undergraduate and graduate writing, for investigating the range of genres submitted in any particular discipline, and for exploring the frequency of particular linguistic features or writing strategies within or across disciplines. Examples of work done so far include the distribution and type of scare quotes (Aull & Barcy, 2010), the frequency with which a sentence-initial “this” is followed by a noun (Wulff, Römer, & Swales, 2012), and the quality and quantity of citations in biology (Swales, 2014). However, we should also offer two caveats. The MICUSP corpus lacks the assignment sheets for the submitted papers; these would have helped us to understand the tasks which students were asked to complete. Secondly, it is not useful for examining non-native speaker academic writing because we asked the wrong question on the short form that students filled in when they submitted their papers. Instead of asking them for their strongest academic language, we asked for their mother tongue. As a result, quite a number of students put “Korean,” “Spanish,” or “Mandarin” when, in fact, they had spent most of their schooldays in an Anglophone educational system.

We thought that investigating imperative usage in MICUSP might show significant disciplinary variation since earlier research (e.g., Fløttum, Dahl, & Kinn, 2006; Hyland, 2002; Swales et al., 1998) had shown this to be the case in published research articles. Generally speaking, disciplines that make much use of logic, mathematics, and technical theory (philosophy, physics, math, statistics, general linguistics, engineering, economics) tend to use imperatives, while others (life sciences, history, sociology, literature, etc.) do not. Although imperatives can have various functions such as offers (“If your pen doesn’t work, borrow mine”) or invitations (“Come to dinner next week.”), most are commands, and, as such, they can be imposing or face-threatening in various degrees. In academic writing, for example, imperatives like “See Appendix A for more details” or “Shake the test-tube vigorously” are much less impositional than something like “Assume for the moment that the speed is constant.” Previous research on published texts also suggests that the first group of disciplines will use a greater range of verbs in the imperative, including those that are potentially more face-threatening, like *assume*, *imagine*, and *notice*. So, a first question here is whether successful upper-level students will use imperatives in similar numbers and in similar ways to those they may have found in their disciplinary reading of articles and chapters. Now, after this scene-setting, we are ready for our first pedagogical foray (see Foray 1). In this foray, we invite participants to hypothesize whether students would generally avoid or make use of imperatives in their academic writing.

In fact, in workshops and classes it turns out that in the USA a clear majority consistently vote for Hypothesis B suggesting that students will follow disciplinary conventions when using (or not using) imperatives in their academic writing. In limited experience elsewhere (Brazil, China, Poland), the response has been much more mixed. And here it is worth noting a few relevant characteristics of U.S. post-secondary education. For example, students at the MICUSP level are more likely than not to call their professors and lecturers by their first names rather than by title and last name. For another, in a semester system, the number of class-time hours for a course can be as much as 40 or more; these protracted contact hours will often mean that there will be considerable time for student participation and discussion. In other words, the institutional differences between instructor and instructed are much reduced. In contrast, when a lecturer in Poland was asked why at least half of the Polish students opted for Hypothesis A, indicating that students would generally avoid the use of imperatives, he observed that his country had been under an authoritarian Marxist regime for decades and so students might still be wary of offending those higher up the academic hierarchy. We don’t know if this explains the intercultural differences we have found. Perhaps there are other explanations?

Sixteen disciplines are represented in MICUSP. When we looked at the proportion of papers that contained one or more imperatives in the main text, we found that the disciplines fell into one of four groups, detailed in Foray 2, depending on the percentage of imperative-using papers found. In this activity, participants are invited to consider how the use of imperatives varies across disciplines.

So far, we have been engaged in activities designed to raise participants’ linguistic and rhetorical consciousness about imperatives; in essence, we have wanted to bring something that we thought would be in the background of their minds into the forefront, at least temporarily. With this done, we can now move into the lexical details (see Foray 3.1-3.6). In our original article, we focused only on the five fields which had the most frequent use of imperatives (Groups 1 and 2, according to the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6843064>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6843064>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)