A survey of university students’ self-reflections on English register awareness

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Abstract

This Bachelor’s thesis describes a survey aimed at exploring first-year university students’ views and perspectives on how their previous education and extra-curricular experiences have prepared them for studying academic English. The students’ comments were analysed from a constructivist perspective, considering how learners experience and conceptualize language, with a focus on how they distinguish context-specific registers of English. Their responses suggest that the average first-year student has received little explicit instruction in formal register differences prior to university studies, and that their register awareness tends to rely on intuitive, implicit knowledge developed independently outside the explicit instruction of the classroom. Most students experience predominantly colloquial and neutral register forms prior to the university, and a majority expressed having difficulty with the highly technical and formal language of their university lectures and writing assignments. On average, they feel that their preparation has been adequate for the task, but more explicit instruction and feedback would improve their overall learning experience.
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1 Introduction

The goal of this research project was to obtain an exploratory assessment of first-year students' register awareness and beliefs regarding their preparedness for learning academic language at the beginning of their studies at the University of Oulu. A questionnaire was devised to address four research questions related to this aim. To their recollection, how was the linguistic concept of register handled in their previous English classes? What kinds of exposure have they had to different registers of English prior to studying at the university? What kinds of strategies have they learned to associate different linguistic forms to communicative contexts? How well do they feel their previous education prepared them for studying English at the university?

To begin, what is meant by the term register and how is it important to language usage and language learning? Register is a sociolinguistic concept defining the systematic variation of language associated with different contexts of usage (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 120; Phillips Galloway, Stude, & Uccelli, 2015, p. 223; Rühlemann, 2008, p. 673-675; Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 154). For example, the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English handles grammatical variations across four major registers: academic prose, fiction, news reportage and conversation (Rühlemann, 2008, p. 681). In the area of writing research and teaching the term genre is sometimes used similarly to register, indicating a set of structurally similar texts that share a similar purpose (Hyland, 2009, p. 64). This systematic contextual grouping of linguistic forms into different language variants can be motivated by sociological convention or communicative necessity. From a social viewpoint, a certain register is deemed more appropriate than others in a given context by the members of the language community. Register also allows expression of identity in discourse in the community. Using academic register, which is relevant to the current study of university English majors’ register awareness, as an example, an academic writer adopts an academic prose style, a set of conventions preferred by the target academic community, in order to be identified as a peer contributing to discourse within that community (Phillips Galloway et al., 2015, p. 223). From a practical communicative viewpoint, academic prose tends to be more abstract and logically structured than conversation because
nuanced academic ideas need to be conveyed with minimal ambiguity, whereas colloquial language tends to use the conversational context to deal with more universal themes (Nagy, Townsend, Lesaux, & Schmitt, 2012, 92-93).

The social and practical importance of register in communication makes it an important linguistic aspect that learners should be expected to master at an advanced level of proficiency required for proper language usage in both social and professional communication (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 120). According to the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFL), appreciation of register shifts reflects an advanced, C-level of linguistic competence (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 122), which is beyond the target intermediate, B-level of competence for secondary education (Opetushallitus, 2015, p. 114). The neutral registers of Standard English are recommended for instruction up to the intermediate level, as the inappropriate use of overly formal language risks possible miscommunications and ridicule (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 120). One key goal of the recently updated Finnish national curriculum, which is scheduled to go into effect this year in August 2016, is fostering learner autonomy, that is to say, helping students to understand their own learning processes and develop the skills that they need to continue advancing to master proficiency beyond the curriculum of the primary and secondary school classroom (Opetushallitus, 2015, p. 113-115). However, according to cognitive and constructivist learning theories, developing new concepts requires that a learner possess a certain level of pre-existing knowledge, or awareness, in order to approach and begin to notice and rationalize new challenges. Thus, in order to facilitate the learning and mastery of register socially and academically after secondary school, it is beneficial to draw attention to the concept, even if the concept is not fully developed and mastered. The expanded language of the updated curriculum also seems to encourage the introduction of a wider range of registers in this regard (Opetushallitus, 2015, p. 113-115) than was called for in the language of the previous curriculum that has been in effect since 2004 (Opetushallitus, 2003, p. 100-101).

In Chapter 2 of this thesis I will first present a brief background of what academic register entails in English, focusing on some aspects of second language acquisition that tend to be problematic for non-native writers in advanced academic or professional settings, and briefly describe some general
pedagogical approaches that have been developed to teach register. In Chapter 3 I will present some aspects of constructivist learning theory and cognitive aspects of second language acquisition that form the theoretical framework of my analysis. In Chapter 4 I will present the survey conducted for the study and describe the method I used in the data analysis I will present in Chapter 5.

2 Background

2.1 What is academic register?

*Academic register* or *academic language* refers to the specialized formal registers associated with educational and scholarly contexts, which utilize linguistic forms that express meaning precisely and concisely (Nagy et al., 2012, p. 92; Pessoa, Miller, & Kaufer, 2014, p. 132; Phillips Galloway et al., 2015, p. 222). Features of academic language include: abstract, technical and morphologically complex vocabulary, typically with Latin or Greek origins; more concise wording than in colloquial registers; and grammatical metaphor (Nagy et al., 2012, p. 93-95).

While it is theoretically possible to discuss recognizable characteristics of academic language, learning all the nuances and discussing them explicitly can be challenging in practice because 'academic' and 'colloquial' registers are better represented as opposite poles of a continuous spectrum rather than a set of discrete linguistic systems (Nagy et al., 2012, p. 92; Phillips Galloway et al., 2015, p. 222). Even within academic language there are variations between spoken and written forms: for example, teachers do not speak the same style of language in the classroom that appears in text books, and researchers do not use the same style of language in an oral presentation that they would employ in a written research article. The details of these differences tend to ultimately be learned through repeated exposure (reading and listening) and practice (writing and speaking) (Phillips Galloway et al., 2015, p. 222). Challenges in this learning process are exacerbated for non-native learners, who tend to receive relatively less exposure to authentic language samples and a relatively narrow range of

2.2 Approaches to teaching register

Hyland (2009) categorizes three approaches that are commonly employed for teaching genre in writing: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and the New Rhetoric (p. 63-69). The goal of SFL approaches is to foster awareness of how rhetorical structures and grammatical forms build meanings and how context and purpose influence the selection of structures and forms to communicate appropriate meanings (Hyland, 2009, p. 64; Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 155). The emphasis here is on functional grammar—examining how the syntax and semantics of the language affect meaning—over decontextualized, object-oriented grammar. ESP closely associates text genres with specific discourse communities, focusing on training learners to understand and apply rhetorical structures to communicate meaning according to expected patterns (Hyland, 2009, p. 65-67). ESP is common in universities, where students learn the highly specific writing conventions expected in their specialized fields. According to Hyland (2009), the New Rhetoric approach emphasizes "raising students' awareness of contextual features of genres and of the communities who use them", focusing on the actions that rhetoric is used to accomplish more than on rhetorical forms themselves (p. 67-69). Relative to SFL or ESP, this approach views genre as a broader concept which is more flexible but also more difficult to teach explicitly (Hyland, 2009, p. 67).

Academic writing presents several challenges for novice writers, such as understanding lexical nuances, phrasing arguments and attitudes clearly, and adhering to the discourse conventions expected by the target audience (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008, p. 41). Writers coming from a first language with very different rhetorical conventions from English can also approach writing with very different conceptual expectations (Hyland, 2009, p. 217). Non-native students are often less sensitive than native students to the conventions of different text-types or genres, tending to overuse features of spoken language in their writing (Gilquin & Paquot, 2008, p. 42). When designing an academic writing course for non-native learners, it is thus particularly important to consider the nature of the students’ first language (or languages), what level of exposure they have likely had to different text-types, and
what linguistic features of the target register are likely to be familiar or unknown from this initial knowledge base.

Learning academic language at the university can be particularly stressful for foreign learners of English if they have not received a sufficient linguistic knowledge base during their secondary studies. In a longitudinal study of university students' academic writing progress in Qatar, Pessoa et al (2014) found that students' primary difficulties during the first year were related to poor reading comprehension, insufficient academic vocabulary, and limited writing experience, in addition to poor time and resource management strategies (p. 137). Students reported having written only short, 100 – 250 word essays over prescribed topics, largely with memorized constructions that prompted little thought or reflection on the language or writing process itself (Pessoa et al., 2014, p. 137). During their first year of university study the students acquired time management and social learning strategies, came to rely more on peer advice and then instructor advice, expanded their productive vocabularies, and developed awareness of the language and writing process (Pessoa et al., 2014, p. 138). This refined cognitive foundation provided them with motivation, focus, and awareness, and their greatest improvements were observed during the subsequent second year of study (Pessoa et al., 2014, p. 139).

3 Theory

As a theoretical framework for this investigation I wanted to consider how students acquire and conceptualize language. While designing and analysing the survey questionnaire described in Chapter 4, I formulated questions and rationalized the students’ responses in terms of constructivist learning theory. In this section I will review the aspects of this theoretical framework that are relevant to the analysis presented in Chapter 5, starting with a clarification of important concepts from cognitive psychology that factor into constructivism and then proceeding to a discussion of the relevant points from the learning theory.
3.1 Cognitive concepts in second language acquisition

I use the term *register awareness* in this investigation to conceptualize the ability of a student to recognize, either explicitly or implicitly, the formal differences between different registers and use appropriate forms competently in a given communicative context. Awareness can be considered in terms of both implicit (unconscious) and explicit (conscious) linguistic knowledge (Ellis, 2008, p. 427). As illustrated by Phillips Galloway et al. (2015), it is possible to demonstrate and reflect on one’s register awareness without necessarily being able to describe it using formal terminology (p. 229). Thus, a student can implicitly (unconsciously or instinctively) recognize and use register differences appropriately without being able to explicitly (consciously or systematically) explain the details of that usage in technical metalanguage. When investigating how students develop register awareness, it is therefore important to consider that they may be unaware of how they understand or fail to understand the details of register appropriateness.

Just as students’ knowledge of register differences takes both implicit and explicit forms, that knowledge is acquired over time through both implicit and explicit modes of instruction and learning (Ellis, 2008, p. 449). Explicit instruction addresses learning goals directly, through exercises designed to directly train a given form, through the presentation of rules about a given form, or discussion about the nature of a given form (Ellis, 2008, p. 444-449; Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 156). Implicit instruction presents learners with opportunities to learn indirectly, such as giving an unannounced vocabulary test from a text the learner has been given to read (Ellis, 2008, p. 445). Thus an instructor may present students with implicit opportunities to notice and learn an aspect of the language such as register without explicitly declaring those opportunities to the class. The differences between explicit and implicit learning are similar to instruction, but are regarded from the perspective of the learner rather than the instructor (Ellis, 2008, p. 449). Explicit learning occurs when the learner makes a conscious effort to better understand some knowledge of interest, while implicit learning occurs through unconscious cognitive processes with increasing exposure to subject material (Ellis, 2008, p. 444-445). The latter aspect can be described as the student developing an instinctive ‘ear’ for the language through natural exposure to different social situations and text types.
The development of language awareness is connected with a learner’s ability to observe how the language is structured and functions based on their experiences with the language in practice and cognitively process those observations to build their own representation of the linguistic system (Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 155). Schleppegrell (2013) highlights the importance of sociocultural interaction in this process, as social interactions help the learner notice linguistic features and provide feedback that reinforces which linguistic forms are deemed appropriate for communicating a desired meaning in a given context (p. 155). For example, instructor feedback on assignments informs the student which expressions are grammatically correct or appropriate in a formal course setting, while conversations with peers in social settings informs the student which forms are appropriate for colloquial situations. The iterative experience of reading or listening (linguistic input), thinking about the language (cognitive processing) to generate a written or spoken response (linguistic output), and receiving feedback to that response, shapes how the learner conceptualizes and uses the language. These cognitive aspects of language acquisition factor into the constructivist learning theory I will discuss next.

3.2 Constructivist Learning Theory

According to constructivist learning theory (Benson, 2001, p. 35-39), learners conceptualise the world through individual mental constructs, or personal meanings that the individual associates with objects or experiences, which are developed and refined by processing new experiences (Benson, 2001, p. 36). When a new experience presents knowledge that can be adequately conceptualized by an existing construct, no learning is necessary. Otherwise, learning occurs when existing constructs need to be refined or reorganized into a new construct in order to process and understand unfamiliar knowledge. Learning is relatively easy for the learner when the new knowledge closely resembles an existing construct, but becomes increasingly challenging and frustrating the more the new knowledge contradicts or deviates from existing constructs (Benson, 2001, p. 37).
Scaffolding and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) are theories that are often used to describe how the interaction between a teacher and a student helps to foster learning within a constructivist learning framework (Benson, 2001, p. 38-39; Ellis, 2008, p. 234-235). Vygotsky defined the ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Benson, 2001, p. 39; Ellis, 2008, p. 235). The role of the instructor and instruction in both theories is to present learning goals, reference material, and feedback that are suitable to the student’s existing knowledge and cognitive abilities, in order to help the student find interest in and draw attention to the subject, make connections between existing knowledge and new information, and manage frustration during the learning process (Ellis, 2008, p. 235). This approach is intended to help the student learn more efficiently and effectively than they would be able to without guidance.

Constructivism is an important framework for learner autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 26), which is an important aspect of long-term language learning beyond the classroom environment. Through classroom instruction, language learners acquire and develop learning skills and strategies that they use to construct their understanding of the target language. Learner autonomy is fostered as the learner acquires the ability to apply those skills and strategies without the direction of an instructor. Autonomy is an important factor for learning about register, because the variation of linguistic forms across registers is complex and therefore difficult to teach in explicit detail and an aspect of language that is mastered at advanced stages of competency beyond the time afforded for classroom instruction.

Autonomous learning does not necessarily equate to isolated learning as the notion of independence might suggest, but autonomy also involves the capacity to effectively contribute to learning in a social group (Benson, 2001, p. 14), which is important for developing an understanding of the sociolinguistic aspects of register, as discussed at end of section 3.1 (Schleppegrell, 2013, p. 155). As has been noted in the previous sections, registers are linguistic variants associated with specific situations of usage,
and the lexical and grammatical characteristics of a register are determined by social conventions and represent an element of collective, social knowledge.

4 Methodology

I conducted a survey of students enrolled in the English Philology course Academic Communication I during the Autumn 2015 term at the University of Oulu, in an effort to explore their self-reflective perceptions about their understanding of register and how they learned about the concept. I employed a questionnaire due to the short time frame of the project. The data needed to be collected and analysed rapidly. Given the subjective and cognitive nature of the research questions, interviews would have been methodologically preferable and potentially offered deeper and more rigorous insights; however, the time required to arrange, conduct, and transcribe the interviews would have been excessive. I expected the use of focused but sufficiently open questions on the questionnaire would provide a satisfactory exploratory survey addressing the research questions.

The questionnaire, provided in the appendix, consisted of 15 questions: three demographics questions, five questions in which responses were rated on a numerical scale (1 – 5), and seven open-response questions. The students in Academic Communication I are studying English as either a major or minor subject, so the questionnaire and collected responses were written in English. Considering that many of the first-year students approached in this survey may not be familiar with the formal metalinguistic terminology discussed here in the theoretical framework and analysis, I opted to use non-academic terminology such as ‘style’ in lieu of technical terms such as ‘register’ in the phrasing of questions, in order to ensure the intended focus of each question was still accessible to all subjects.

I employed a qualitative approach in the analysis of the survey responses. As an initial step, I read through all of the completed questionnaires, taking note of interesting comments that related to the concepts highlighted in the theory section. Next, I entered the responses into an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate organization of the data and statistical analysis on the numerical responses and countable elements. When entering the responses from open questions into the spreadsheet, I tried to
reproduce the text as written by the respondent as much as possible, maintaining misspellings, grammatical errors, capitalization, and punctuation and noting line breaks and other formatting details (for example, noting where a response was given as a bulleted list): the quotations appearing here in the analysis and discussion sections reflect these details. Pseudonyms assigned to each anonymous respondent, which are used to present citations in the analysis, were chosen at random. After I had entered the survey data into the spreadsheet, I reread the responses again with my original notes as a guide, and made counts of how many responses reflected a certain thought or point of interest. This rereading process was repeated for each point of interest until I felt that I had reached a certain degree of consensus in the identification and interpretation of the most important trends in the data.

The statistical counts of points noted in the responses appear in the text of the analysis and discussion sections. The values offer some semi-quantitative support of the conclusions, highlighting which points were mentioned by a number of the students and which might represent more minority views; however, I did not use these statistical counts as the sole determiner of a comment’s significance, as some comments can prove to be qualitatively insightful even if only mentioned by a single student.

5 Analysis and Discussion

In this section I will summarize the responses of the survey and briefly discuss some of the important insights shared by the students. The first sub-section presents the demographic information describing the respondents. The second sub-section presents a semi-quantitative summary of the survey questions that asked the students to respond with a numerical rating. The third sub-section summarizes comments shared by the students in response to open questions related to language instruction and awareness. The fourth and final sub-section similarly summarizes comments that illustrate the perceived impact of language instruction and their register awareness along with other factors on the stress of adjusting to university studies.
5.1 Data collection and demographics

I presented the questionnaire to the class at the start of the Academic Communication I lecture on 6th November 2015, and they were allowed approximately 15 minutes to respond. 43 respondents completed the questionnaire in this data collection session. The 43 respondents included 29 females, 13 males and one respondent claiming “both” genders. A majority of the respondents reported having graduated from secondary school within the past three years, which was taken as a positive factor for the reliability of the student’s reflections on their secondary school experiences: in contrast, several of the older students mentioned that it was difficult to remember details from so long ago. This factor was considered when weighing the relevance of comments. The distribution of graduation years is presented in Figure 1. 30 (70%) of the respondents graduated between 2013 and 2015, 38 (88%) graduated between 2008 and 2015, and three students graduated in 2002 or earlier. Two students failed to report a year, instead writing ‘lukio’ in the box: presumably the phrasing of the question, with the parenthetical (lukio, ammattikoulu) to define ‘secondary school’ at the end, confused these students.

Figure 1. Responses to question 2.
Finnish was the dominant language of instruction during secondary school for the respondents: 40 out of 43 attended Finnish-speaking secondary schools, two attended English-speaking International Baccalaureate (IB) schools, and one respondent had completed secondary school outside of Finland (the nation and language of instruction were unfortunately not obtained).

**Figure 2. Responses to question 4.**

Q4. "On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you think you understand what 'academic language' means?"

**Figure 3. Responses to question 9.**

Q9. "On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you feel you know what words, phrases or grammar forms are appropriate for formal, written English and which are more appropriate for less formal, spoken English?"
5.2 Semi-quantitative analysis

Questions 4, 5, 7, 9 and 10 asked respondents to rate their opinion on a scale of 1 to 5. As illustrated in the histograms presented in Figure 2 through Figure 6, the distributions of responses were generally bell-shaped, suggesting that the number of respondents and the phrasing of the questions provided an adequate, normally distributed sample of the English student population; the exception to this trend is observed in the responses to question 9 (Figure 3, lower), which exhibits a one-tail profile consisting of no 1’s or 2’s and predominantly 3’s or 4’s.

The numerical responses to question 4 (Figure 2) and question 9 (Figure 3) give semi-quantitative indications that the students, on average, appear to feel that their register awareness is at least adequate for their university studies. The one-tail profile of responses to question 9 (Figure 3) was particularly interesting, as this question was most directly related to the students’ self-reflections about their own competence: ‘On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you feel you know what words, phrases or grammar forms are appropriate for formal, written English and which are more appropriate for less formal, spoken English?’ None of the 43 students rated their understanding with a 1 or a 2, whereas 20 students gave a rating of 3, 17 students gave a rating of 4, and 6 students gave a maximum rating of 5. These responses suggest that the majority of the students feel confident that they understand the differences between informal and formal styles of English at least adequately (3) or perhaps somewhat better than average (4): at least none of the students feel that they are completely unaware of register differences. The response profile for question 4 (Figure 2), which asked students to rate how well they ‘understand what “academic language” means’, indicated a greater variance in self-confidence when considering their understanding of what constitutes academic writing: a couple of students gave themselves a negative rating of 2 (just one category better than ‘not at all’), relatively fewer students (11) rated their understanding with a rating of 3, 21 students gave a rating of 4, and 9 students gave a rating of 5 (‘very well’). The mean rating for question 4 was 3.9, which was not significantly higher than the mean rating of 3.7 for question 9, suggesting that, on average, the students are equally confident in their
understanding of formal differences as they are in their understanding of what is expected in academic writing.

Q5. "On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you think your English classes in primary (alakoulu, yläkoulu) and secondary school prepared you for learning academic language at the university?"

Figure 4. Responses to question 5.

Q10. "On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well were the differences between less formal and more formal styles of English taught in school?"

Figure 5. Responses to survey question 10.
While the results suggest that the students feel a certain confidence in their own register awareness, there ratings were less positive about the quality of their previous instruction in this regard. Questions 5 (Figure 4) and 10 (Figure 5) asked the students to rate how well their English classes in secondary school prepared them for university (question 5, Figure 4) and taught the differences between less formal and more formal styles of English (question 10, Figure 5). The mean rating for both of these questions was 3.0, with fewer 5’s (most positive) and more 1’s (most negative) than were provided for question 4 (Figure 2) and question 9 (Figure 3), which asked the students to rate their register awareness. The responses indicate that, while the students exhibit a relatively positive self-confidence in their understanding of different forms of English (with mean averages of 3.9 and 3.7 for questions 4 and 9, respectively), they tend to regard the quality of their previous English instruction as adequate or somewhat lacking (with mean averages of 3.0 for questions 5 and 10). This difference suggests that the students feel a significant part of their learning occurs beyond the classroom: these external sources of learning were considered in the qualitative analysis of open responses discussed in section 5.3.

Question 7 (Figure 6) probed how stressful the students have found their introductory English lectures and assignments. This was an important consideration in the survey, as the sources of stress can be a significant hindrance to learning and can indicate that learning goals have been set too far beyond the students’ pre-existing knowledge. The median response of 3 suggests that most students feel that the stress of adjusting to university courses has been moderate, and that their university courses have presented them with a level of difficulty on par with their linguistic abilities.

It is important to note that these conclusions are largely qualitative, since only the end points of the numerical scale were given specific definitions of meaning (e.g. from 1, ‘not at all’, to 5, ‘very well’), so it is uncertain what each student was considering when they assigned a numerical value to their response. However, the numbers do provide some insight into the overall trends and were helpful in considering the general relevance of individual comments in the open responses that will be discussed in section 5.3.
The written responses indicate that the students, on average, feel that they began their English studies with an adequate basic understanding of English, but lack a certain degree of register awareness that would reduce the stress of transition to university-level coursework. More than half of the students (26 out of 43) indicated in written responses that they feel formal, academic language was not explicitly taught or was inadequately taught prior to university, and only 4 students indicated that aspects of formal writing had been specifically taught at school. 7 students expressed a lack of or a difficulty with academic vocabulary, and only 3 students gave specific indications that academic vocabulary or distinctions between informal and formal vocabulary were taught in school. While the survey indicates that academic language was noticeably lacking in the students’ pre-university education, 12 respondents did indicate that basic grammar, vocabulary, and general communication skills had been covered well.
Basic grammar was taught quite well. Our essays and other homework were mostly based on daily, casual communication. I don't recall any attempts to teach us academic writing. (Emilia’s\(^\text{1}\) response to question 6)

An important exception to this trend came from the IB students and the foreign-educated student, who indicated that they received explicit instruction in academic writing in secondary school.

It depends. In primary school the language learning is somehow on the basic level whereas in IB they taught the difference pretty well (Venla’s response to question 11)

Despite this overall perceived lack of explicit instruction in academic language, the majority of respondents, based on the semi-quantitative responses to question 5 and open responses to question 6, suggested that they felt they had obtained a knowledge base that was adequate for their university English classes.

The majority of students indicated that academic language was not explicitly taught prior to university, but a mean rating of 3.7 (question 9, Figure 3) on a 1-5 scale for their understanding of register appropriateness suggests that they feel they understood formal language at least adequately. This raised the question: where or how did they feel they developed this register awareness? Answers to this question were drawn from responses to questions 11, 12 and 14.

Question 11 (“What kind of formal differences did you learn about and how did you learn them?”) was posed after question 10, which asked about how well register differences were taught in school, so 16 out of the 43 responses gave some indication that the subject was specifically addressed to some extent during lessons prior to university, but some of the comments also indicated how their register awareness developed through experiences with using English outside of the classroom. 10 of the 43 respondents indicated that they developed their understanding of formal register differences primarily from experience outside of classes.

There wasn’t so much discussions about what’s formal and what’s not. High school taught more like the general use of language. (Noora’s response to question 11)

\(^{1}\) All names presented with the respondents’ quotations in the analysis section are randomly assigned pseudonyms.
I DON'T THINK THEY USED THE WORD FORMAL BACK THEN. I LEARNED ALL I LEARNED FROM READING & WRITING, FROM EXPERIENCE. (Sami’s response to question 11)

I never really paid that much attention at school, and most of my language acquisition has come from media, art etc. ... (Elina’s response to question 11)

I've learned slang from listening and Reading informal dialogs. Formal styles I have learned from Reading non-fiction and being involved in academic circles. (Essi’s response to question 11)

I learnt about different registers, colloquial language, different dialects, different grammatical structures that are preferred in formal contexts. I learnt them by doing different tasks on lessons and listening to the teacher (Anna’s response to question 11)

The last of these comments was particularly interesting, as Anna was the only student to specifically describe receiving exposure to such a wide range of language variants in secondary school coursework. In the final open-ended question of the survey she further explained how her teachers provided extended materials and motivation to explore the language in greater detail.

In high-school I managed to develop a great motivation for learning English because the teachers were very encouraging. They showed and taught us materials that were something "extra": they taught idioms and "fancy" words and showed that learning English can be fun. So far at university learning hasn't been very "fun", except for the literature course (Anna’s response to question 15)

As a positive outlier of the study from the point of reporting a wide range of register exposure, Anna’s comments describe an exposure to a much wider range of registers in the classroom than the typical respondent. The expanded wording of the recently updated Finnish national curriculum places a greater emphasis on autonomy and understanding registers (Opetushallitus, 2015, p. 113-115) than the previous curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2003, p. 100-101). As Anna is a recent graduate (2015), her comments may be a sign that some teachers are already successfully implementing some of the changes to foreign language education that will soon be going into effect.

While the semi-quantitative data suggested that the students felt reasonably confident in their understanding what academic language means (question 4, Figure 2, meaning rating 3.9 out of 5),
most respondents demonstrated difficulty in explicitly describing specific linguistic features that are associated with formal registers.

Mostly stuff about not using dialects and leaving the apostrophe out (e.g. do not – don’t) How? Teachers told us to learn them, we had to choose. (Pat’s response to question 11)

I can't really remember what kind of formal differences I've been taught about, because the ones I know just seem so obvious to me. Maybe things like not writing "I gotta go" or "ya'll" or such on one's essays. But there are plenty of formal differences I wasn't really aware of before university and I'm sure there are plenty I still don't know about. (Nea’s response to question 11)

The responses to this question suggest that the register awareness of the typical student relies on implicit knowledge gained through implicit learning processes at work while completing assignments as well as using English outside of the classroom.

Responses to question 12 ("How do you decide if a word or phrase is appropriate for a formal essay or if it is too informal?") indicate that the majority of students rely primarily on intuition and experience, though some indicated that they employ more rigorous reasoning processes or learning strategies. 24 of the 43 respondents wrote that they use their “intuition”, “feeling”, “instinct”, “ear”, “gut”, etc. to determine register appropriateness.

By feel. I'm probably not very good at this. (Juho’s response to question 12)

I try to write formally. I think that your "language ear" (an odd word, kielikorva) tells you when you're writing informally. (Teemu’s response to question 12)

Use your best judgement, does it sound appropriate? If all else fails, google it. (Jami’s response to question 12)

15 students indicated that they use more systematic learning strategies or selection criteria, such as considering the contexts in which they have encountered the term in question, using dictionaries, etc.

If the word is usually used in everyday language, it is often too informal. Long and complex words tend to be more formal, and words derived from French, Latin, Greek... (Anna’s response to question 12)
The student providing this response was the positive outlier who claimed, in her response to question 11 quoted above, to have received explicit instruction in register differences in a Finnish-speaking secondary school. I found the comment particularly interesting, as she explicitly mentioned some of the specific features of academic vocabulary—“longer” and “complex” words, and those with Latin and Greek etymologies—that are highlighted in Section 2.1. A similar comment from another student reflected the rationalization of register appropriateness based on the practical need for communicative clarity.

If a word is rigid, absolute or/and confident and leaves no room for doubt, chances are I will use it in formal writing (Mikko’s response to question 12)

Another student demonstrated an awareness of the social aspect of register, namely the objective and impersonal tone, of the academic register:

Not being able to make my essays as "personal" as I used to do, meaning that my personality and own style shouldn't be as obvious (getting used to the amount of words required) (Sofia’s response to question 8)

This social aspect of the writer establishing an academic voice or identity to the reader can prove difficult for learners who feel that their own voice is lost in the process. While this comment expresses an understanding of what is expected in the register, there is no indication here whether or not the student understands why the expectation is there.

Responses to question 14 (“Where do you tend to use English outside of class?”) indicated that the typical student is actively engaged with English on a daily basis, and the register of that exposure is predominantly colloquial. Unsurprisingly, the internet was almost ubiquitously mentioned.

1. Internet
2. Internet
3. Internet
4. books, magazines, tv … (Eetu’s response to question 14)

More specific contexts included video games, social media, television or films, music, books and conversational chat. Several students mentioned writing a novel, lyrics, or poetry in their free time,
and a couple even mentioned reading or conducting research. A couple of students mentioned interactions with native speakers, and a few more mentioned social interactions with international students.

With my friends who are not Finnish and my relatives who have moved to the USA and no longer speak any Finnish, they correct my mistakes and teach me new phrases etc. while we chat. (Anni’s response to question 14)

I’m currently doing research and writing a novel, so a lot of studying English happens because of that. My best friend and God daughter are Brits, so I talk English with them. I don’t talk English that much but almost all U read and write, and watch tv etc., are in English. (Jenni’s response to question 14)

Reading course books and scientific articles. I also have to talk in English as there are many international students in Oulu. (Noora’s response to question 14)

The majority of English usage appears to be social and colloquial for almost all of the students. Literary sources are also significant, but few appear to receive significant routine exposure to non-fiction or academic registers.

To summarize this section of the analysis, the comments to the open-ended survey questions indicate that the students typically recalled receiving little explicit instruction in register differences prior to starting at the university. Based on the survey, their register awareness appears to rely primarily on implicit knowledge gained from experiences with the neutral, semi-formal register of Standard English traditionally expected for classroom instruction and highly colloquial registers of English usage outside of the classroom. The register awareness of the typical student in the survey is therefore likely to be implicitly learned from a relatively narrow range of registers, which increases the difficulty or uncertainty for many in recognizing register appropriate forms for academic writing assignments. The students’ self-perceived difficulties and sources of stress are discussed in the next section.
5.4 Sources of stress in adjusting to university English courses

The lack of explicit instruction in academic English expressed by the respondents seems to be a significant source of stress in adjusting to academic language at the university. Handling academic language was the most frequently mentioned (by 17 respondents) source of difficulty or stress in the process of adjusting to university English classes. More specifically, the complexity of the language and the amount of terminology were highlighted:

I feel that [adjusting to university English classes] has been very difficult. We have many grammar-related courses at the same time and I am second-guessing all my writing and I feel like I don't have even the basic skills. (Emilia’s response to question 6).

Other courses, such as the linguistics and grammar course, were mentioned as being fast-paced or presenting a challenging amount of homework. In addition to the complexity of the academic language relative to the Standard English taught in secondary school, adjusting to relatively longer writing assignments was also frequently mentioned as a challenge:

the grammar goes more into details, and while it wasn't actually necessary to listen during secondary school lectures, now learning requires more from me. the writing assignments are also noticeably longer. (Veera’s response to question 6).

The majority of students reported having written only short writing assignments of a few hundred words in secondary school which did not necessarily conform to strict rhetorical guidelines in the students’ recollections. Analytical or argumentative essays of a thousand or more words with strict citation requirements therefore seem to present an unfamiliar academic challenge to most of the students. Three students indicated that they felt the instructions to these writing assignments had been unclear:

I have always been given very specific instructions for assignments, which is not really the case here. Obviously there’s also the fact that I'm expected to have a certain level of skills in writing and speaking English, which occasionally causes me to feel anxious. (Nea’s response to question 6).
This quote is particularly interesting in this context, because it shows how uncertainty in the goals or subject for an assignment can contribute to the overall anxiety. These results resemble the findings described in Pessoa et al.’s study of sources of stress among first-year university students in Qatar (Pessoa et al., 2014, p. 137).

Another similarity to the findings of the Qatar study (Pessoa et al., 2014, p. 137), was the mention of time-management as a significant challenge for a number of students. This was mentioned in the context of both workload and procrastination or personal lack of time management skills:

It is difficult that I am now neck-deep in formal-language skills requiring assignments and essays. (Mikko’s response to question 6)

I tend to start doing my assignments either late or very close to deadline. It's a bad habit I've had since alakuolu. (Trying to get rid of it.) (Arttu’s response to question 6)

The lectures are of good length, pretty straightforward and I like the fact that the materials can be seen online. Some of the assignments we've received are pretty boring and involve a lot of information searching and reading articles, which I have found out takes a lot of time. (Johanna’s response to question 6)

In addition to simply finding the interest and motivation needed to work on the task, poor register awareness can compound difficulties with time management, as the time spent searching for register-appropriate forms and second-guessing word choices compounds the net workload.

Four respondents mentioned frustration stemming from feedback to assignments as a source of difficulty or stress, which is an important point to consider from the perspective of constructivist learning theory. Without an assessment of the student’s performance by a more knowledgeable user, it is difficult or even impossible for the student to bridge the cognitive gap in trying to adapt their pre-existing mental constructs to new material.

Difficult: instructions for assignments have been unclear and there hasn't been feedback of all of them so it has been difficult to know if my "academic" skills are good or not (Anna’s response to question 8)
There is hardly any feedback on written assignments, so we don't (at least I don't) fully understand what my mistakes are. (Iida’s response to question 8)

There should be writing exercises at any stage of education as we learn the best when writing & receiving some feedback from them as well. It feels that in some courses here in the university, we haven't got that much feedback from our writings. (Venla’s response to question 15)

The importance of informative feedback and productive interaction with the instructor to the learning process was also highlighted in several comments to question 11:

We were taught some spoken language words that aren't usually used in formal English. I also learned by just writing essays and then hearing and seeing the comments my teacher had made. (Johanna’s response to question 11)

I remember that I once wrote "wanna" in an essay in lukio and I remember that that was pointed out as informal style. (Jenna’s response to question 11)

A couple of interesting comments from one student were more positive about the feedback she had received, but expressed frustration with the overall challenge of the learning process.

Andrew is a stern teacher. He points out mistakes and suggests a different approach. The lectures aren't as useful as the group meetings. A lot of idioms, I've noticed, aren't appropriate. (Pinja's response to question 11)

We're set up to fail, which is frustrating. Of course that's a good way to learn from your mistakes, but still. (Pinja’s response to question 8)

The response to question 11 suggests that there was a productive interaction with the instructor in small group sessions, but her perception that they are being “set up to fail” results in frustration with the general learning process. These comments express rather explicitly what many other comments seem to imply: the cognitive gap between the students’ implicit knowledge and the style of language they are expected to produce is just challenging enough to generate a feeling of frustration that is exacerbated by a perceived lack of explanatory feedback on their performance. Most students seem to feel that they have an implicit notion of what forms are expected in the target register, but they do not yet understand them specifically enough to accurately produce register-appropriate text or fully comprehend the nature of their errors.
It is worth noting that this survey did not attempt to assess error analysis, so the student comments and the analysis of them address only their own self-perceptions of their proficiency and feelings toward their studies to this point, although the submitted comments do provide a sample of their written fluency. A number of students were able to write quite clearly and generated native-like text. However, there were many spelling errors in the data, which are reproduced here in the quoted examples, which suggest that a number of students may be overestimating their fluency. Nonetheless, their comments provided useful insights to how they perceive and construct their awareness of the language.

6 Conclusion

The goal of this research project was to obtain an exploratory assessment of first-year students' register awareness and beliefs regarding their preparedness for learning academic language at the beginning of their studies at the University of Oulu. A questionnaire was devised to address four research questions related to this aim. To their recollection, how was the linguistic concept of register handled in their previous English classes? What kinds of exposure have they had to different registers of English prior to studying at the university? What kinds of strategies have they learned to associate different linguistic forms to communicative contexts? How well do they feel their previous education prepared them for studying English at the university?

The results of the survey indicated that the students in the Academic Communication I course, on average, feel that their previous experiences with learning English both in and out of the classroom have provided them with an adequate, fundamental understanding of the language, although they feel that more explicit instruction detailing the specific, formal features of academic writing and academic vocabulary would ease their transition to learning academic English at the university.
A number of students indicated that basic grammar and the structures of English were taught well at the secondary level, but they received exposure to a narrow range of registers from formal instruction and acquired most of their understanding about the differences between colloquial and Standard English through exposure to the media, internet, literature, and social interaction. With the relative lack of explicit instruction on the topic of register, their register awareness is based on implicit knowledge that they have constructed through implicit learning as they notice how the language is used through their experiences.

While some students have been taught or independently developed systematic rules or learning strategies for guiding their decisions about register appropriateness, the majority rely primarily on their instincts to choose appropriate forms and vocabulary. Given their largely non-academic mental corpus, this can leave them feeling that they are without reliable standards for comparison with which to accurately self-assess the quality of their academic writing. Academic language, particularly vocabulary, presents a significant challenge to the first-year students, as it represents an unfamiliar deviation from the type of English they have been exposed to in their previous experience.

Further work on this topic could look at approaches to assist new students in rationalizing academic language more systematically. Difficulties with academic vocabulary, particularly unawareness of what criteria are useful for distinguishing between academically appropriate expressions and colloquial expressions, were a common source of frustration for students who have had little experience with academic language. Perhaps additional explicit focus could be placed on the nature of academic vocabulary to help draw their attention to why certain expressions are more formal than others. Directed reading assignments that allow the students to connect rhetorical style to pragmatic meaning could be one approach to help improve their familiarity with specific academic conventions. The effectiveness of instructor feedback, in particular explaining why certain forms are preferred over others, is another factor mentioned in the survey that could be explored in further detail.
References


Appendix. Questionnaire

Language Awareness Survey

1. Gender (female, male)

2. What year did you finish secondary school (lukio, ammattikoulu)?

3. What kind of secondary school did you go to? (Finnish-speaking, Swedish-speaking, English-speaking (IB), not in Finland)

4. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you think you understand what ‘academic language’ means?

5. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you think your English classes in primary (alakoulu, yläkoulu) and secondary school prepared you for learning academic language at the university?

6. What was taught well or what do you wish would have been taught better?

7. On a scale of 1 (very stressful) to 5 (not at all stressful), how do you feel the adjustment to university lectures and writing assignments has been for you?

8. What has been easy or difficult about your adjustment to university English courses?

9. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well do you feel you know what words, phrases or grammar forms are appropriate for formal, written English and which are more appropriate for less formal, spoken English?

10. On a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very well), how well were these differences between less formal and more formal styles of English taught in school?

11. What kind of formal differences did you learn about and how did you learn them?
Language Awareness Survey

12. How do you decide if a word or phrase is appropriate for a formal essay or if it is too informal?

13. What kinds of writing assignments did you have in school (how many words per assignment, what types of text, different writing styles, etc.)?

14. Where do you tend to use and learn English outside of classes?

15. Do you have any other thoughts or comments to share that might be useful for this research?