

## Chapter 6

# How to Select Grammar for Teaching (or Not)

Based on Research<sup>1</sup>

*Eli Hinkel*

### **Introduction**

In most language programs, a great deal of time, energy, and other resources is typically devoted to teaching second language (L2) writers to construct academic discourse and text; that is, how to generate and organize ideas into coherent college-level prose. Grammar is an essential tool for producing comprehensible sentences that contribute to a coherent text. Although in theory, the value of explicit grammar instruction has been debated by researchers and methodologists alike, the basic fact is that “without grammar very little can be conveyed” Wilkins (1972, p. 111). Without grammar, neither understandable sentences, phrases, nor text – spoken or written – cannot be produced. In grammar curricula, the first order of priority is to identify the foundational constructions that learners have to be able to produce fluently, proficiently, and relatively accurately.

L2 instruction almost always takes place under great time constraints for teachers and learners, and it is important to maximize learners' language gains and make learning as efficient as possible. As every L2 user knows from experience, attaining a necessary level of proficiency takes focused instruction and concerted effort from both teachers and learners. Expediting this process at least to some extent can prove to be beneficial in the long run.

The essential elements of grammar instruction can be designed to be flexible within the curriculum structure, and the amount of effort and time devoted to each can be adjusted depending on students' needs. The teacher's work load and the student's "**learning burden**" (Nation, 2022, p. 28) – that is, "the amount of effort required" to learn L2 grammar and the necessary vocabulary – are expected to be realistic but certainly not very light.

Grammar textbooks and many writing courses usually cover the traditional range of structures that have been included in grammar teaching from time immemorial. The reasons for this lie in the historical criteria for writing and publishing "complete" grammars and grammar manuals (Hinkel, 2017, 2020).

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on research findings for teaching essential academic grammar for writing. In addition, the chapter also briefly notes the grammar and vocabulary components of academic text that are usually found in L2 writing but are hardly ever used in formal prose.

The traditional range of grammar structures in textbooks and instruction practically always includes the following.

- The entire array of the English tenses from the present progressive (e.g., *I am walking*) to the future perfect (e.g., *will have eaten*).
  - While the present progressive occurs very frequently in conversations, for example, the past perfect progressive tense has all but disappeared (e.g., *John had been writing a letter*).
  - The future perfect has largely vanished from use (e.g., *They will have been there all summer*).
  - Conditional verb tenses are actually rare in writing (e.g., *If they had studied, they would have passed the exam*).
- All types of subordinate clauses, from the commonly used to ones that are hardly ever encountered (e.g., noun clauses in the subject position: *That they passed the test was impressive*).

- The passive voice in all tenses (e.g., *had been being cleaned, will have been written*).
- Gerunds and infinitives (e.g., *I enjoy walking* but not *\*to walk*, or *We need to hurry*, but not *\*hurrying*).

Textbook grammar structures are not used with equal frequencies or for the same purposes. Some of them have almost completely disappeared from use in Standard American and Standard British English. For example, past perfect progressive or the future perfect passive (e.g., *The ball will have been kicked into the goal*) are hardly ever found in today's English usage.

In addition, a number of studies (e.g., Hinkel, 2002a, 2015, 2016, 2020) have established that with greater exposure to conversational interactions in English and despite intensive academic writing instruction, L2 writers often employ informal language features in formal and academic contexts. Most L2 learners engage in a large number of informal conversations and typically cannot easily distinguish between formal and colloquial language attributes that are unsuitable in formal academic prose, e.g., *no way that he can prove it; I totally agree that children hate long music lessons; The author of this article is a rich guy*.

Teaching the whole gamut of English grammar when a great deal of it is less than useful may be one reason that explicit grammar teaching is often seen as a tedious exercise. To put it simply, grammar structures found in practically all L2 textbooks and curricula are not of equal value to students.

Based on the findings of current research on the constructions and attendant vocabulary found or not found in written academic prose (e.g., Biber et al., 1999; Hinkel, 2002b, 2005, 2011; Nation, 2022; Nation & Webb, 2011; Ur, 2011), grammar structures can be divided into the following two major areas.

1. Grammar constructions essential in academic writing.
2. Grammar and vocabulary not usable in academic prose.

The material and teaching techniques discussed in this chapter specifically target the areas of L2 text that require substantial improvement, and that improvement is only possible with intensive, extensive, and deliberate attention. These techniques are based on the highly practical principle of maximizing learners' language gains and focusing on a few shortcuts.

Focused grammar instruction works with several sets of simple rules that collectively can make a noticeable and important difference in the quality of students' writing (Hinkel, 2005 2011 2013; Nation, 2022; Nation & Webb, 2011).

Generally, the following aspects of L2 academic grammar need at least some degree of polishing and additional work in practically all instruction:

- Sentence boundaries and phrase construction.
- The past and present verb tenses and conventions in academic writing.
- The forms and functions of the passive voice.
- Noun clauses and noun phrases.
- Adverb clauses and adverb uses.
- Giving and presenting examples.
- Weeding out colloquialisms, emphatics, informal elements, and outdated constructions.

## **Essential Grammar Constructions for Writing**

Grammar teaching can be made productive for learners if it is cumulative – that is, when the curriculum builds on structures that learners already know or from the linguistically simple to more complex constructions. To this end, grammar curriculum – even at the intermediate levels of student proficiency – can begin with an examination and analysis of grammar uses in formal writing. Initially, the goal of instruction is to develop learners' awareness and noticing of frequent and specific constructions, and then building on this foundation, grammar regularities can be explicitly addressed and practiced in text production (Batstone & Ellis, 2009; Ur, 2011, 2013). Frequent grammar constructions are found in abundance in practically all academic prose, and they readily lend themselves to ongoing instruction.

### ***Constructing Sentences***

In English, the structure of a basic sentence is relatively straightforward to teach because English has a rigid word order, e.g., the subject is followed by a verb, which is followed by an object. Although many variations of this skeletal structure are possible, the additions also adhere to somewhat inflexible patterns.

Sentence elements are sequentially ordered and can be located relative to other sentence elements. For example, in most sentences other than questions, the subject noun phrase precedes the verb, e.g., *the car stopped; raindrops are falling; a sentence needs a verb.*

The constructions in need of extensive and persistent instruction.

- Sentence word order and boundaries, e.g., avoiding fragments and run-ons.
- Phrase construction, e.g., most singular countable nouns need to have an article, such as *a book, an experiment, a study*, but no article is needed with noncount nouns – *research, knowledge, homework*.
- Every sentence must have a verb to be grammatical.

Rigidity in the order of sentence components can be similarly profitable for teaching elements of the noun phrase and the verb phrase (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 The Order of Sentence Elements

Subject	Verb	(Optional) Object or Adjective
The baker	baked	a (delicious) cake.
The park	is/appears to be	beautiful/open/very green.
Research	requires	(careful) preparation/patience.

An example basic sentence structure can consist of the following.

1. An **optional** sentence-initial adverb/prepositional phrase (e.g., *In the park/Last night/Occasionally*).
2. A **subject noun or noun phrase** (e.g., *many birds/soccer players/boys and girls*) must be present in all complete and formal sentences, except commands (e.g., *take a seat*).
3. A **verb** – in English sentences, a verb phrase is required for all sentences to be grammatical.
4. An object if the main verb requires a direct object (e.g., *Mary bought a cake/John sends messages, but not \*Mary bought or \*John sends*).

The essential sentence elements and their positions are the following.

- **The subject first, followed by a verb** – these are required and in this relatively rigid order (except in questions).
- The **object noun is optional**, and its presence depends on whether the verb needs it, e.g., the object is not included if the verb does not require it, e.g.,

*Birds sing / Flowers bloom / Students study / Teachers teach.*

The sentence components determine the grammar variations among them, e.g.

- singular subject nouns – e.g. **the boy** – require singular verbs – **sings**
- (transitive) action verbs that require an object have to be followed by an object, e.g.

*construct a sentence, develop a project, make dinner*

This approach to teaching sentence- and phrase-structure systems of English does not place a great deal of emphasis on conveying particular meanings. The regularities and the rigid order of sentence and phrase elements provide a clear and realistic infrastructure that serves as a foundation for greater grammatical fluency and accuracy.

## Sample Practice Activities

### Sentence Chopping

Instructions for students:

- Draw a vertical line to separate subjects and verb phrases.
  - Locate and mark various parts of the *verb phrase*, such as helping (auxiliary) verbs and the main verb.
1. The train is arriving on Platform 9¾. Hagrid will wait for the students there and help them with their luggage.
  2. In American English, the present perfect tense has been replaced by the past tense, which requires fewer language elements.

3. In talk shows or movies, it is easy to notice when the present perfect occurs in stories or conversations.
4. Example sentences show how to use words in sentences or questions.
5. Phone conversations in a new language can be difficult to understand.
6. From greetings and introductions to small talk, many online examples can provide practice opportunities for effective communication.

### Sentence Building

- Complete the following sentences and pay special attention to the required and optional structure elements.
1. The first step in making a sandwich \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. Learning frequent phrases and expressions requires \_\_\_\_\_.
  3. The benefits of physical exercise and an active lifestyle \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  4. \_\_\_\_\_ can be prepared \_\_\_\_\_.
  5. Each student \_\_\_\_\_.
  6. The language teacher presents \_\_\_\_\_.

### *Academic Verb Tenses*

Although grammar textbooks describe around 12 tenses or more (e.g., the present progressive, the present perfect, or the present perfect progressive), the easiest way to teach tenses is to start by separating tenses and aspects (Leech & Svartvik, 2003). Realistically speaking, only a few combinations of tenses and aspects are used in academic writing, as opposed to, for example, conversations or fiction. For academic writers, the task of using tenses and aspects correctly can be greatly simplified.

For example, **past tense** constructions are relatively infrequent in academic prose, compared to, for instance, news reports, personal letters, or face-to-face conversations. For instance, article abstracts or research reports are usually presented in the **present tense**, while the actual research project is described in the past tense or present perfect tense, e.g., the following.

- *The paper discusses xxx.*
- *The temperature reached 100 degrees.*
- *Many researchers have studied/used electronic thermometers.*

## The Simple Present Tense

The simple present tense refers to actions and events that are described in general terms. That is, they have no specific (or definite) time when they occur, e.g.,

- *A soccer player kicks the ball, and the ball flies through the air.*
- In academic writing, the present tense refers to actions and events that take place usually and repeatedly, including at the present time, but not necessary at the present moment or current time, e.g.,
  - *Cool and crispy cucumbers **can become** pickles with very little work. Pickles **require** a basic recipe of water and salt. To make pickles, the home cook **needs** a few glass jars and around 30 minutes. Cucumbers with thin skins **make** better pickles than other types of vegetables.*
- The present tense also refers to **states or conditions**, rather than activities. Here are a few examples of stative verbs:
  - *imagine, contain, know, mean, recognize, remember*
  - *I know/recognize him, but not \*I am knowing/recognizing him*

With the exception of references to specific actions and events that occurred in the past, for L2 writers, the task of constructing academic text can be greatly simplified when large portions of their assignments and papers (if not entire assignments and papers) can be written in the simple present tense. For example:

*The original concept of a sandwich that **includes** using slices of bread **is** frequently connected to 18th-century Europe. However, placing some kind of bread or cakes under and over various kinds of meat or vegetables long **predates** that time. Flat breads **are** popular throughout Europe and Asia.*

**A word of caution:** The academic present tense requires establishing subject-verb agreement, e.g.

- *Student**S** study**Ø** vocabulary.*
- *A grammar book**Ø** provide**S** many examples.*
- *The cake**Ø** taste**S** delicious.*

## The Past Tense

Verbs used in the past tense refer to actions, events, or states that took place or existed in the past and no longer continue in the present (as in completely finito, done, and over with).

The past tense necessarily marks an action or a state for the past time, no longer continuing at the present time. For example:

*Food historians explain that pickles **originated** in Asia. According to popular stories, construction workers **made** pickled vegetables by storing cabbage and cucumbers in wine and vinegar. These **were served** as snacks throughout the region. Later they **arrived** in Europe with travelers and traders. A jar of pickled eggs **used** to be often seen in English pubs and American eateries.*

## Subsection Summary

The teaching of verb tenses and verb phrase components in academic prose has to address the following.

- The simple present tense and the simple past tense (for case studies and examples) and subject-verb agreement.
- Present perfect tense for introductory sections of academic essays and papers, e.g.,
  - *Making snacks **has been** a prominent topic in research.*

Generally speaking, progressive tenses are very rare in academic prose. However, they are common in conversations and spoken interactions, and for this reason, the usage of progressive verbs may impart a somewhat conversational flavor to academic writing. In formal academic writing, simple present (and occasionally simple past) tenses can be much more effective and easier for students to use (Carter & McCarthy, 2006).

## **Sample Practice Activities**

### The Present Tense

Instructions for students:

- Correct the errors in the following sentences and create specific rules that can be followed to avoid making similar errors.

- Also mark various parts of the verb phrase, such as helping (auxiliary) verbs and the main verb.
1. \*Cooked rice being delicious for any meal.
  2. \*One cup of cooked rice will serving for two individuals.
  3. \*Hot sandwiches for any meal, including breakfast or dinner.
  4. \*Different kinds of rice has been taken different times to cook.
  5. \*A standard portion of rice consist of  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup per person.
  6. \*A hungry person possibly to eat more than a standard portion, so how much rice to serve depended on how hungry someone will being.

### *The Academic Passive Voice*

Uses of the passive voice are extraordinarily common in academic writing, and to a large extent, the prevalence of the passive voice is determined by academic discourse conventions. In formal writing, passive constructions have a number important functions. One of these is to project academic indirectness, detachment, and objectivity requisite in the English language academic tradition, and particularly so in natural sciences and engineering (Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Ferris, 2009; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2012). For example:

*Clouds **are made** of little drops of water. Within a cloud, water droplets collapse together and become larger. When the drops **cannot be suspended** in the cloud, they **are formed** into rain or snow. Lakes and rivers **are** typically **filled** with rain water that **is supplied** from the ground moisture.*

There are probably few constructions in writing and writing instruction that have been subject to as much debate and controversy as the passive voice. Its opponents claim that the active voice is more emphatic, vigorous, and clear than the passive; that in active voice the doer of the action is placed in the sentence subject position; and that active verbs are usually more effective, simple, and easy to read.

Corpus analyses of academic prose show that, in real academic writing, outside of the teaching of composition, passive voice use is ubiquitous and remains a prevalent feature of academic text in various disciplines.

A small number of verbs are never used in the passive voice and are always encountered in the active (Table 6.2). These verbs need to be learned because verbs with similar meanings exist in other languages (e.g., Arabic or Spanish) in which they can be and often are used in the passive voice. In many cases, L2 writers need to be particularly careful when employing these verbs in their text.

Table 6.2 Verbs That Are Always (or Almost Always) Used in the Active Voice\*

<b>appear*</b>	<b>arrive</b>	<b>belong</b>	<b>consist</b>	<b>come</b>	<b>die</b>
<b>happen</b>	<b>fall</b>	<b>lack</b>	<b>last</b>	<b>occur</b>	<b>resemble</b>
rest	<b>remain</b>	<b>seem</b>	stay	wait	

Note: \*The verbs in bold font are **always** used in the active voice

Sources: Extracted from Biber et al. (1999); Swales and Feak (2012)

### Subsection Summary

The following constructions require intensive instruction (and persistence).

- Functions and uses of the passive voice in academic text.
- Passive voice constructions in simple present and simple past tenses (e.g., *the project **is completed**; the file **was sent***).

### Sample Practice Activities

Comment: These exercises often lead to very interesting – and somewhat unexpected – discussions for pairs or small groups of students. It is important, however, that the teacher follow up with a whole class discussion and explanation.

Instructions for students:

- In your opinion, which of the following sentences are grammatical, which are a little strange, and which are not grammatical?
- Explain why you think that some of the sentences seem strange or incorrect, and how they can be corrected.

### Using Tenses in Context

1. \*It was a dark and stormy night, and students studied in the library because they will have a test tomorrow.
2. (a) ?The stock market will rise tomorrow because of the election.  
(b) ?The public will elect our favorite candidate.

### English is a Strange Language: Strange Subjects of Active Verbs and Strange Active Verbs

1. (a) The dog ate my homework.  
(b) The food processor ate my homework.  
(c) The vacuum cleaner ate my homework.
2. (a) The tree is growing.  
(b) John's paper is growing.  
(c) The city is growing.  
(d) The child is growing.
3. (a) The man is running.  
(b) The stream is running.  
(c) The bus is running.  
(d) The test is running.  
(e) The recording is running.  
(f) Time is running.
4. (a) A barometer predicts the weather.  
(b) A TV station predicts the weather.  
(c) A meteorologist predicts the weather.
5. (a) The weather is predicted (by a barometer).  
(b) The weather is predicted (by a TV station).  
(c) The weather is predicted (by a meteorologist).

### Noun Clauses for Restatements and Reporting Verbs

#### Noun Clauses and Reporting Verbs

Noun clauses are highly frequent in academic writing, and they are probably the most common type of subordinate construction, as well as by far the most structurally complex (Hinkel, 2015, 2020; Leech & Svartvik, 2003; Quirk et al., 1985). The most important discourse function of noun

clauses is to present, restate, and paraphrase information from sources. For this reason, noun clauses are particularly prevalent in academic writing when they follow reporting verbs in summaries, restatements, and citations (Charles, 2006; Swales & Feak, 2012).

Noun clauses have the same functions as single word nouns and noun phrases, they occur in the same sentence positions, such as the sentence subject or the object.

Following are a couple of examples.

<i>Most cooks know</i>	<b><i>that the best pickles are made at home.</i></b> [ <u>simple noun</u> – the fact/correct information]
<i>Bread bakers can usually tell you</i>	<b><i>what their favorite recipe is.</i></b> [ <u>simple noun</u> – the fact/the secret]
<i>Many students believe</i>	<b><i>that they have a great deal of homework.</i></b> [ <u>simple noun</u> – the idea/the claim]

Practically all simple sentences and questions can become noun clauses. In fact, noun clauses are simple sentences are embedded into complex sentences. They are marked by such conjunctions as ***that, what, when, where, why***. Following are examples.

- *The article explains **why pizzas are very popular.***  
(embedded question: *Why are pizzas popular?*)
- *In many world regions, parents believe **that breakfast is the most important meal of the day.***  
(embedded question: *Is breakfast the most important meal?*)
- *The video shows **how a healthy meal can be prepared in 10 or 15 minutes.***  
(embedded question: *How can a healthy meal be prepared?*)

By far, the most common pattern of noun clauses is used following reporting verbs with the conjunction ***that***.

Lists of **reporting verbs** can be found in most L2 grammar books, beginning with those for intermediate learners.

- Reporting verbs can be as simple as *ask, explain, describe, say, speak, talk, mention, or tell*.
- Basic reporting verbs occur predominantly in conversations.
- In academic prose, the most frequent reporting verbs have more complex meanings, e.g., *acknowledge, admit, claim, clarify, conclude, determine, discuss, explain, state*.

Reporting verbs are particularly important in paraphrasing, writing about readings, and citing information from sources. These verbs are used to introduce indirect (and reported) statements in the form of noun phrases or noun clauses (Table 6.3), e.g.,

- *Harry Potter stated that he lived with his relatives and slept under the stairs.*

Table 6.3 The Most Frequent Reporting Verbs Followed by *That* Clauses  
(in declining order)

<i>state</i>	<i>show</i>	<i>suggest</i>	<i>know</i>	<i>see</i>	<i>find</i>
<i>ensure</i>	<i>indicate</i>	<i>think</i>	<i>believe</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>feel</i>

Source: Adapted from Leech et al. (2001)

### *Wh*-Questions as Noun Clauses

***Wh*- noun clauses** are ***wh*- questions** embedded in longer sentences, e.g.:

- *Fast food sellers know when the demand for easy meals is high and where office workers go for lunch.*
  - *At first, pizza bakers could not predict how many pizzas they could sell very quickly.*
- *Wh*-questions are those with *what, when, where, who, whom, which, whose, why, or how*. The answer to a *wh*- question cannot be a yes or no.
  - *Wh*- noun clauses place the most important and new information in the second part of the sentence and introduce the topic.
  - The topic-introduction function of *wh*- clauses is particularly important for connecting ideas in two or more sentences.

- In nouns clauses, the constructions with *wh*-questions and subordinators, such as ***what, where, who*** can be particularly error-prone.
- In direct questions, subjects and verbs are placed in the reverse order with the verb first. However, in the embedded sentence, the subject is placed first, followed by a verb.
  - *Where **does Harry sleep?*** →
  - *The story explains **where Harry sleeps.***
- A helping (auxiliary) verb (e.g., *do, does*) is added in almost all questions (with the exceptions of *who* and *what* questions to sentence subjects, e.g., *Who came? What's for dinner?*).

A couple of examples of embedded questions are presented in Table 6.4.

Table 6.4 Examples of *Wh*-Questions as Noun Clauses

The Question	The Noun Clause
What <b>are</b> the most popular types of pickles?	Shoppers would like to find out <b>what the most popular types of pickles ARE.</b>
When <b>is</b> the right time to pickle cucumbers?	Pickle makers often ask <b>when the right time to pickle cucumbers IS.</b>
Where <b>can</b> one <b>find</b> the best cucumbers?	Pickle lovers are keen to learn <b>where one CAN FIND the best cucumbers.</b>

### *The Steps in Converting Wh- Questions Into Noun Clauses*

1. To convert direct *wh*- questions to noun clauses, the questions need to be turned into statements.
2. In statements, the subject is placed before the verb; that is, the verb follows.
3. In noun clauses, when *wh*- questions are converted to indirect questions, all *wh*- words must be retained and cannot be omitted.

When paraphrasing direct *wh*- questions, most of the work takes place inside the noun clause. Table 6.5 illustrates the grammar operations.

Table 6.5 Converting Embedded Questions Into a Noun Clause

Main Clause	Noun Clause With Embedded Question
<i>Pickle makers would like to find out</i>	<b>what</b> [are] the best cucumbers for pickling <b>are</b> .
<i>Pickle experts demonstrate</i>	<b>how</b> [does] the cook find <b>+ S</b> the best tasting cucumbers.
<i>Pickle eaters have long discussed</i>	<b>why</b> [do] some pickles <b>taste</b> better than others and <b>what</b> [is] the secret to the best pickle <b>is</b> .

### Subsection Summary

The following constructions need to be taught (and these are highly error-prone at most levels of L2 skills).

- The order of the subject and the verb in noun clauses and the word order in statements and questions, e.g.:
  - *The learners often ask **why they need to learn these complicated clauses**.*  
NOT:  
\**why do they need to learn*
- Verb tenses in noun clauses, e.g.,
  - *Harry **believed** [the past tense] that his relatives **did not treat** [the past tense] him well.*  
NOT:  
\**Harry believed that his relatives do not treat him well.*
- Reporting verbs (around a dozen) for paraphrasing required in academic writing, for example:
  - the author ~ says, states, asks, indicates, comments, notes, observes, believes, points out, emphasizes, reports, concludes, underscores, mentions, finds*
- Noun clauses in the subject position are **very rare** in formal academic prose, even though they can be found in most grammar textbooks, e.g.,
  - *That students study hard is a well-known fact.*

These structures practically never occur in student academic writing, L1 and L2 alike.

## Nouns and Noun Phrases

Many studies of English corpora (the plural form of corpus) have demonstrated that gerunds (nouns that end in *-ing*, such as *reading*, *writing*, *singing*, and *dancing*) and abstract nouns are very common in academic texts (e.g., Biber et al., 1999). Most gerunds and nominalizations (derived nouns, such as *density*, *conclusion*, *discussion*, *merriment*, and *kindness*) refer to concepts, actions, and processes.

- Teaching indispensable academic vocabulary with **a few close, frequent, and carefully selected** synonyms provides an important long-term advantage. In learning and writing, students can immediately see their uses and practicality. For example:
  - method* – *procedure, process, technique*
  - dimension* – *proportion, measurement, extent*
  - maximum* – *greatest, highest, biggest, largest*
- Helping students to expand their vocabulary for academic writing is a gradual and painstaking process.
- Making vocabulary substitutions in the context at hand – that is, in students' writing – is easier and more practical than teaching vocabulary out of context.
- Directly relevant and immediately applicable vocabulary teaching meets students' needs for remembering sets of interchangeable vocabulary substitutions, to be used and re-used in various written assignments.

Vocabulary alternatives are essential for maintaining text cohesion and lexical variation. Limiting vocabulary substitutions to only three or four most practical, frequent, and useful words, for each word, is of crucial importance – **but no more than three or four**.

There is a lot of vocabulary to learn, and it is a tedious and time-consuming process.

## Count and Non-Count Nouns

In English, **non-count nouns** are relatively few, e.g., *equipment*, *knowledge*, *research*, *information*, *traffic*, *vocabulary*. There are only around 30

frequently used non-count nouns, and learning them can take less than an hour. However, they can play an important role in making text appear error-prone and flawed because they are very common in academic texts.

**Count nouns** are nouns that can be counted. They can be singular or plural and can be used with singular or plural verbs, e.g.,

- *book – books, sentence – sentences, sandwich – sandwiches, pickle – pickles.*

**Non-count nouns cannot be plural**, and they cannot be used with a plural verb or indefinite articles *a/an*. Some are commonplace in speaking and writing, but others are predominantly academic, e.g.,

- *attention, equipment, nutrition, education, health, homework, importance, intelligence.*

### Impersonal *It*-constructions

The impersonal pronoun *it* with the verb *be* is more common in academic texts than practically any other written or spoken genre (Biber et al., 1999). The most prominent text function of *it + be* construction is to depersonalize text and create an impression of the writer's authorial distance and objectivity, e.g., *it is clear/reasonable, it can be easy to notice, it seems/appears*. These constructions are grammatically complex, and for this reason, they frequently present an area of difficulty for academic L2 writers.

Various analyses of written academic corpora have shown that non-referential *it* occurs frequently in the following combinations. These constructions are useful for academic writers to learn and use correctly.

### **The Most Frequent *It*-subject Constructions in Academic Writing**

(1) followed by adjectives

<i>it is (not) (im)possible to/that</i>	<i>it is interesting to</i>
<i>it is likely/unlikely that</i>	<i>it is difficult/easy to</i>
<i>it is important to/that</i>	<i>it is (not) clear that</i>
<i>it is necessary to</i>	<i>it is true that</i>

(2) followed by modal verbs (*may, can, might, could*), e.g.

<i>it may be that</i>	<i>it can be seen that</i>	<i>it might be noted that</i>
-----------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------------

(3) followed by modal verbs and adjectives

*it may (not) be (im)possible to/that*    *it may be necessary to/that*  
*it should be possible to/that*            *it can be helpful to/that*  
*it may be useful to/that*

(4) with passive constructions

In passive constructions accompanied by *that* clauses, the most important information is contained in the subordinate clause.

*it can be seen that*            *it has been suggested that*  
*it should be noted that*    *it has also been ~*

*determined, found,            that*  
*argued, stated,                . . .*  
*implied, shown,*  
*noted, written*

## Noun Phrases with Adjectives

Noun phrases with **adjectives** play a very important role in academic prose. While common descriptive adjectives are found practically anywhere in academic text, **noun modifiers** (e.g., *a lab experiment, a university study, a research method*) play a key role in thesis statements and academic statements of purpose. Descriptive (modifying) adjectives and adjective phrases can be used specifically for marking and signaling thesis statements, which are considered to be obligatory in academic prose (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2012).

In literature overviews and summaries, evaluative adjectives represent an integral part of the writer's assessment of a work or source. Evaluative adjectives express a judgment of what they are describing, e.g., ***detailed, thorough, useful, convincing, promising, limited, restricted***. Familiarity with these modifiers can allow L2 writers to recognize them in text when they are reading, and, additionally, employ them in their own writing.

## Subsection Summary

These academic language constructions need to be taught and learned.

- Abstract academic nouns (nominalizations that are nouns ending in *-ion*, *-ity*, *-ness*, *-ment*), gerunds, and other conceptual (non-physical) nouns of all types, e.g., *entertainment*, *achievement*, *density*, *decision*, *demonstration*, *priority*, *production*, *pollution*, *addition*, *creation*.
- Impersonal *it*-constructions, e.g., *it seems/appears/is clear that . . .*
- Noun phrases with descriptive adjectives, e.g., *an important project*, *a careful experiment*, *a temporary job*.

## Sample Practice Activities

### Reviewing Something: A Story, Movie, Pizza, Lunch, or Game

- **Reporting verbs** (or a few adjectives) can be organized into groups, such as Positive–Negative, Supporting–Rejecting, or Neutral.
- Numerous reporting verb lists can be found online or in most grammar books.
- An example of a starter verb list is presented in Table 6.6, e.g., *observe*, *discuss*, *state*, *explain*.
- Then students add their own verbs or adjectives to supplement the lists.
- Working in pairs or individually, students write evaluations of readings, movies, TV shows, shoes, lunches, or backpacks. This task can be assigned several times throughout the course.

Here's an example of a starter list for students to begin making their own.

Positive Reporting Verbs	Negative Reporting Verbs	Neutral Reporting Verbs
<i>agree</i>	<i>deny</i>	<i>discuss</i>
<i>confirm</i>	<i>claim</i>	<i>demonstrate</i>
<i>contend</i>	<i>dispute</i>	<i>conclude</i>

### Adverb Clauses and Adverbs

In general, adverb clauses are more common in speech than in writing. On the other hand, in instruction in academic writing and argumentative writing in particular, the uses of various types of adverb clauses, such as

causative (*because, since*), concessive (*although, even though*), and conditional (*if, whether*) are often recommended in explanations, reasoning, and analysis (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Quirk et al., 1985; Leech & Svartvik, 2003; Swales & Feak, 2012).

Here are a few examples:

<i>When Harry Potter went to school,</i>	<i>he needed to buy a wand.</i>
[the adverb clause]	[the main clause]
<i>Pickles can be sweet or tangy</i>	<i>although the tangy flavors are more popular.</i>
[the main clause]	[the adverb clause]
<i>Because Harry could not drive</i>	<i>Ron had to operate the flying car.</i>
[the adverb clause]	[the main clause]

- When working with adverb clauses, L2 writers need to determine what information is important in their sentences:  
The most important information goes into the main clause, and secondary/background information goes into the adverbial clause.
- In general terms, concessive (*although, though*) clauses can be employed as softening devices that can also help writers to project authorial objectivity and a balanced perspective.

Sentences with concessive clauses can be highly useful and easy to employ in introductions, thesis statements, topic sentences, and generalizations, e.g.,

***Although/While xxx, . . . yyy.***

### Subsection Summary

The following constructions need to be taught.

- Functions of adverbs in pivoting discourse and information flow of primary and secondary importance, e.g., backgrounding information in subordinate clauses.
  - Concession clauses (e.g., *although, though*).
  - Conditional clauses (e.g., *if, in case, unless*).
  - Formal adverbs as softeners and limiters in academic prose (e.g., *according to, apparent(-ly), theoretically, general(-ly)*).

## *Giving and Presenting Examples*

In academic writing instruction, giving examples is often strongly encouraged. In most textbooks on academic writing, among other types of supporting evidence, examples are presented as a frequent means of rhetorical support for the writer's position.

In L2 academic prose, giving examples is often seen as the easiest and most accessible rhetorical support strategy.

Instructional guides consistently point out that the examples need to be representative and clear with relevant facts, statistics, descriptive details, and expanded explanations.

In teaching academic writing, however, what can serve as representative examples, relevant facts, descriptive details, and elaborate explanations is not always clearly understood. Teachers and researchers have found that L2 writers rarely employ this strategy successfully, in keeping with the English language conventions of presenting examples.

In fact, in many cases, the strategy can become counter-productive. For instance, poorly chosen or poorly written examples can make L2 writing seem to be particularly un-academic.

Here are some un-academic examples that often occur in student writing:

- *\*For example, my brother/my country/my case.*
- *\*For example, I do too/I love it.*
- *\*For example, I agree/I hate it.*
- *\*Take my example, for instance.*
- *\*I am a good example.*

A few studies have found that L2 writers frequently misunderstand how to provide appropriately academic examples, as can be the case with brief mentions of situations or events, or lengthy, highly personal narratives (Gilquin et al., 2007; Hinkel, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2011; Shaw, 2009).

## How to Construct Academic Examples

In academic writing, examples and extended examples present **factual information** that is clearly and well organized, as well as easy to grasp. Following are a few important points for constructing academic examples.

### What Academic Examples Should Contain

- Information from **published and citable sources**, such as statistical or factual data, research findings, or opinions of experts, e.g.:
  - *For example, Johnson (2030) found that xxx, and he stated yyy . . . .*
  - *For example, over half of all pickles are eaten for lunch, and around 30% disappear at dinner.*
- Explicitly stated generalizations indeed apply to most (or many) cases/people/situations/ events, e.g.:
  - *For example, 86% of Americans like pickles, and 75% consume pickles every year.*
  - *For instance, 47% of all adults eat at least one sandwich each day.*
- Specific cases that directly apply to most (or many) cases/people/situations, e.g.:
  - *For example, a sandwich that is prepared at home can contain meat, poultry, or fish, and it is eaten cold.*
  - *For example, pizza is a very popular dinner, and about half of the North American population has pizza three times a month.*
- Expanded descriptions – a sentence or two –of the documented and factual events/developments/groups/communities/circumstances/public figures, e.g.:
  - *For example, the first pizza was invented a thousand years ago, and it was originally served as a flat bread with some toppings for workers and farmers. Flat and round breads and cakes are found in many world regions, such as Asia and the Middle East.*
  - *For example, most widely available pickles are made from cucumbers and cabbage that are kept in salted brine with vinegar and spices. The salt water makes it impossible for any harmful bacteria to multiply.*

## **What Academic Examples Should Not Include**

- Tales of personal experiences, as well as those of one's family members, classmates, roommates, or neighbors.
- Extensive explanations of personal opinions – if they are not based on demonstrable and clearly stated facts.
- Stories or rumors that one has heard from other people.

Academic examples need to be constructed carefully and include **directly stated representative and factual information**. Occasionally (and only occasionally), an example of a dramatic situation or event can be used to illustrate how it relates to an extreme and unusual outcome.

### Subsection Summary

The following constructions need to be taught.

- Sentence-level or expanded exemplification with: *for example, for instance, such as*.

## **Grammar Constructions to Avoid in Academic Writing**

A number of constructions in academic prose have been identified as rare. In fact, some are never encountered in large English corpora of academic and student writing (Biber et al., 1999; Hinkel, 2002b; Leech & Svartvik, 2003). Regardless of these facts, many such constructions are ubiquitously taught in practically all grammar courses simply because they are found in language textbooks. Clearly, these rare expressions are not productive or useful for L2 writers when the learning burden is relatively high. It goes without saying that rare constructions should have a low priority in teaching and learning.

### *Verbs and the Verb Phrase*

In academic text of any type, only a small proportion (around 8%) of all verb phrases are used with the perfect aspect, and the progressive aspect is employed in even fewer constructions. The usage of the perfect progressive

aspects in all tenses (e.g., *have/had been reading*) is encountered particularly rarely at the rate of 0.5% of all verb tenses and aspects (Biber et al., 1999).

The following verb tenses are of low instructional importance.

- Future perfect and future perfect progressive (e.g., *will have written, will have been dancing*).
- Past perfect and past perfect progressive (e.g., *had told, had been cleaning*).

### ***The Passive Voice in a Range of Tenses***

The uses of the passive voice with various complex tenses and aspects, such as past perfect progressive or the future perfect passive (e.g., *The message will have been sent by tomorrow*), are hardly ever found in today's spoken or written English (Hinkel, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Swales & Feak, 2012). Teaching these constructions is not very important, nor is it the best use of limited class time, despite the fact that they continue to appear in student grammar textbooks. The teaching of the passive voice constructions for L2 writing should focus on those that are frequently encountered and can be productive for learners in the long run.

#### These Passives Are of Low Instructional Importance

- Passive in future perfect (e.g., *will have been written*).
- Passive in future progressive (e.g., *will be being written*).
- Passive in present progressive (e.g., *is being written*).
- Passive in past progressive (e.g., *was being written*).
- Passive in past perfect (e.g., *had been written*).
- Passive in past perfect progressive (e.g., *had been being written*).

### ***The Subjunctive in Noun Clauses***

As early as the 1980s, Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 155–158) stated that subjunctive constructions were originally found in Old and Middle English, but it is usually described as moribund, fossilized and almost extinct in present-day English. Currently, such constructions seem particularly stilted and dated, and there is little reason that these should appear in instructions of any kind.

Some examples of English subjunctive constructions are the following.

- *It is important that he see Ø a doctor.*
- *The doctor demanded that they/he/she be on time.*

### ***Inversions in Statements (Rather Than Questions) With Negatives in the Initial Position***

In constructions with initial negative adverbs and adverbial phrases (e.g., *at no time*), subject–auxiliary verb inversion has all but disappeared in Standard American English and Standard British English (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Quirk et al., 1985). These structures typically convey somewhat bookish emphasis and intensity that are seldom suited in formal academic writing, where authorial detachment and objectivity are the norm (Swales, 1990).

Some examples of English textbook inversions are presented in what follows.

- *Never have I/we seen . . . .*
- *Little did we/he/she know . . . .*
- *Rarely do we encounter . . . .*
- *Barely did she/they open the door . . . .*
- *Hardly ever did he talk . . . .*
- *Not only did we bake a cake but also we ate it all up.*

Research has established that colloquial and conversational vocabulary and grammar constructions are prevalent in L2 academic prose because many L2 writers have far more exposure to conversational discourse than they do to formal writing. Frequently, however, L2 writers may not be aware, for example, that such colloquialisms as ***humongous, huge, dude, stuff, guy, thing, or totally*** – or assertions such as ***this paper doesn't prove anything*** – are unsuited in academic prose.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the distinctions between academic vocabulary and colloquialisms need to be emphasized throughout the teaching of formal writing at any level (e.g., Chang & Swales, 1999; Hinkel, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2011, 2015; Leki et al., 2008). However, an additional reason that conversational language is typically found in L2 academic prose is that L2 writers simply lack academic vocabulary and grammar that are needed to produce formal text.

Vocabulary and grammar constructions outlined in what follows rarely occur in academic writing and need to be “un-taught.” That is, students need to be taught specifically not to use these in their academic writing. Alternative and more formal constructions have to be provided in instruction.

## **Conversational Vocabulary and Grammar Constructions That Are Not Suited for Academic Writing**

### Vocabulary

- Colloquialisms, e.g., *more or less, always, never, perfect, countless, stuff, thing(y), ugly, obviously, whoever, whatever.*
- Emphatics and exaggeratives of any type, e.g., *absolutely, a lot, complete(-ly), deeply, for sure, hugely, total(-ly), not on your life,* or *I do agree with this.*
- *Some-, any-, no-* (indefinite) pronouns (*some-/any-/every-/no-* words, e.g., *somebody, nothing, everyone, anything, no one, anyone, something.*

### Grammar

- Contractions (*don't, can't*)

### Rare in Academic Prose

- Progressive verb uses – very rare in academic prose, e.g.:
  - *?I am explaining my point of view clearly.*
  - *?Car drivers are loving electric vehicles.*
- *by*-phrase passives, e.g.:
  - *?the depth is determined by the technician during the experiment.*
  - *?the bread can be baked by anyone.*

For L2 writers, academic vocabulary work is required. To replace the occurrences of *guy, dude, thing, stuff, people,* and *whoever,* more formal vocabulary needs to be taught and learned.

## **Sample Practice Activities: Cleaning Up Colloquialisms and Weeding Out Emphatics**

Students can work in pairs, small groups, or individually to edit their own text or texts supplied by the teacher such as the following.

- *\*Transportation companies are always dealing with all kinds of problems, like there is never a boring day.*
- *\*Everyone loves funny movies because they are totally enjoyable for all kinds of people.*
- *\*Phones and tablets are the most popular equipment because they absolutely make our work easier and faster.*
- *\*A lot of students just stream videos instead of watching TV all day.*
- *\*Nobody wants any trouble in their life, and risk management is the best course of action for all investors.*
- *\*We have a lot of social media to give us a lot of information about everything, so we know what's going on in the world every day.*
- *\*The author says that he is an expert on management, but in my father's company, we never do things the way that he is saying.*
- *\*These days, all students copy their homework from the Internet, and they don't need to read the textbook.*
- *\*School attendance is always a problem in my country because teachers teach huge classes, and no one knows who is there or not.*
- *\*My parents are pushing my brother to become an engineer, but he totally hates math.*

Important distinctions between conversational and formal written language should represent ongoing instructional objectives at all levels of proficiency. In language teaching in general, the teacher's job is to guide learners' attention and point out the important and necessary constructions. The uses, meanings, and functions of academic vocabulary and grammar – and in specific contexts in particular – can be discussed and practiced.

## **A Final Note**

A teaching focus on relatively specific grammar constructions and the attendant vocabulary can greatly expedite learning to write more coherent and less error-prone text. The grammar components that are almost always in need of additional work include the following.

- Constructing complete sentences and avoiding fragments.
- Specific and problematic areas academic verb tenses and the passive structures.
- Grammatically accurate noun clauses, frequent noun phrases, and abstract academic nouns.

- A few types of adverb clauses in written discourse.
- Building and presenting academic examples.

The greatest benefit of streamlining grammar instruction is that it allows language teachers to work with more efficient pathways in practical language teaching. Grammar teaching that has the goal of preparing students for academic studies needs to be designed to develop learners' practical skills that are directly relevant to producing written prose. In grammar learning, becoming aware of how structures are used can provide an additional benefit because learners can notice structures that they may otherwise simply miss.

In language teaching, there are in fact very few tips and tricks that can expedite learning. One of these that can maximize language gains entails using language chunks and whole expressions to produce academic text. This technique can noticeably improve L2 accuracy and fluency, and subsequently lead to automatization with usage and repetition (Hinkel, 2020).

For example, high-frequency constructions, phrases, and expressions can be learned as whole units, instead of just their elements that have to be further assembled during the process of communication.

In instruction, a very efficient perspective is to look at grammar and vocabulary as a continuum of constructions, from the highly systematic and regular (e.g., third-person singular verbs or subject-verb agreement) to the much more fixed, such as count and non-count nouns, or idiomatic phrases that often defy explanations and translations (e.g., *this evidence sheds a great deal of light on . . .*, *to bring about*, *to give rise to*, *to take center stage*, *to push the envelope*, *to take on board*, *the bottom line*).

The approach to language teaching can be used with language elements of all shapes and sizes, from tiny bits, such as word prefixes and suffixes, to phrases to whole sentences or even sets of sentences, including the perennial areas of difficulty such as frequent metaphors and fixed expressions.

Classroom instructors are the ones who are best suited to implement appropriate, relevant, and effective instruction. They are the best judges of the applicability of particular curricular choices that can be combined with other approaches to provide the greatest benefit for students. In virtually all academic and learning contexts, however, producing reasonably fluent and accurate written L2 text requires students to attain a relatively advanced range of grammar and vocabulary.

## Note

- 1 Parts of this chapter in an earlier form were published in *English Teaching*, 68/4, 2013.

## References

- Batstone, R., & Ellis, R. (2009). Principled grammar teaching. *System*, 37, 194–204.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Pearson.
- Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Cambridge grammar of English: A comprehensive guide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chang, Y., & Swales, J. (1999). Informal elements in English academic writing: Threats or opportunities for advanced non-native speakers. In C. Candlin & K. Hyland (Eds.), *Writing texts, processes and practices* (pp. 145–167). Longman.
- Charles, M. (2006). Phraseological patterns in reporting clauses used in citation: A corpus-based study of theses in two disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 310–331.
- Ferris, D. (2009). *Teaching college writing to diverse student populations*. University of Michigan Press.
- Gilquin, G., Granger, S., & Paquot, M. (2007). Learner corpora: The missing link in EAP pedagogy. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 6(4), 319–335.
- Hinkel, E. (2002a). *Second language writers' text*. Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2002b). Teaching grammar in writing classes: Tenses and cohesion. In E. Hinkel & S. Fotos (Eds.), *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms* (pp. 181–198). Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2003). Adverbial markers and tone in L1 and L2 students' writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35(2), 208–231.
- Hinkel, E. (2005). Analyses of L2 text and what can be learned from them. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 615–628). Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2011). What research on second language writing tells us and what it doesn't. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (Vol. 2, pp. 523–538). Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2015). *Effective curriculum for teaching L2 writing: Principles and techniques*. Routledge.

- Hinkel, E. (2016). Practical grammar teaching: Grammar constructions and their relatives. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Teaching English grammar to speakers of other languages* (pp. 171–191). Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2017). Prioritizing grammar to teach or not to teach: A research perspective. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 369–383). Routledge.
- Hinkel, E. (2020). *Teaching academic L2 writing: Practical techniques in vocabulary and grammar*. Routledge.
- Leech, G., Rayson, P., & Wilson, A. (2001). *Word frequencies in written and spoken English*. Longman.
- Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (2003). *A communicative grammar of English* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Leki, I., Cumming, A., & Silva, T. (2008). *A synthesis of research on second language writing in English*. Routledge.
- Nation, P. (2022). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, P., & Webb, S. (2011). *Researching and analyzing vocabulary*. Cengage.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. Longman.
- Shaw, P. (2009). Linking adverbials in student and professional writing in literary studies: What makes writing mature. In M. Charles, S. Hunston, & D. Pecorari (Eds.), *Academic writing: At the interface of corpus and discourse* (pp. 215–235). Bloomsbury.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis*. Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J., & Feak, C. (2012). *Academic writing for graduate students* (3rd ed.). The University of Michigan Press.
- Ur, P. (2011). Grammar teaching: Research, theory, and practice. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 507–522). Routledge.
- Ur, P. (2013). Language-teaching method revisited. *ELT Journal*, 67(4), 468–474.
- Wilkins, D. (1972). *Linguistics in language teaching*. Edward Arnold.