

ABSTRACT

Academic writing proficiency of Danish university students

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”Young students write and reason like eleven year olds.” That was the assessment of Kresten Schultz-Jørgensen (2011), censor at the Danish universities KU, RUC and SDU, a couple of years ago – a stance shared by other censors in the media (e.g. Dahl 2013). Within the Danish universities similar concerns have been expressed, especially with regard to the academic writing skills of the students (Hjortdal 2014). But although the criticism has been harsh and the consequences seem serious, the potential problem has had limited scholarly attention in Denmark.

The purpose of our research project is to chart and analyze the academic writing proficiency of newly commenced Danish university students. More specifically, we wish to study the different writing issues that new students are experiencing when trying to break the academic genre code. Thus, we focus on the students’ *prerequisites* for academic genre proficiency and flawless language usage. The project builds upon preceding studies in students’ writing proficiency in primary and upper secondary school (Krogh et al. 2015), but adds a linguistic focus that is oriented towards text linguistic studies of academic writing (Snow & Uccelli 2009).

Based on an experimental design of an academic writing assignment, we conduct a combined corpus linguistic, functional and orthographic text and discourse analysis of 162 papers written by newly commenced Danish and journalism students at the University of Southern Denmark (data collected in September 2015). The participants have been selected as representative for students who are expected to be proficient in Danish written language at a high level. In the assignment the students (74 Danish and 88 journalism students) were asked to *account for* the most significant concepts in an excerpt from a theoretical academic text on cohesion, subsequently to *analyze* a manipulated news article using the theoretical concepts, and finally *assess* the use of endophora in the news article. After the test the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire on their writing process, their thoughts on envisaged recipients, etc. Accordingly, the experiment has been designed to test the students’ proficiency of three central academic speech acts (accounting, analyzing and assessing) at continual higher taxonomic levels.

Our analyses are divided into three partial projects from which we will present selected results at the conference:

1. an orthographic analysis of the students’ spelling and proficiency of Danish written language norms and an analysis of their (sub)conscious attitudes towards deviations from written language norms,

2. a pragmatic analysis of the students' proficiency of academic writing conventions, including academic speech acts, writing positions, quotation techniques and hedging/modality,
3. a comparative corpus linguistic analysis of the academic writing of Danish and journalism students for the purpose of examining if two different mindsets of professional competency make a difference on academic writing routines early in the study.

The three analyses form an empirical basis for discussing the students' prerequisites for academic writing proficiency, including factors that may strengthen or weaken it. This in turn may contribute to a more qualified public debate on academic writing proficiency at the universities, preferably with an eye to *scaffolding* the students in their transition to higher education.

References

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