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Supporting the internationalization of Brazilian research: combining EAP tutor training and academic writing autonomy

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Supporting the Internationalization of Brazilian Research: combining EAP tutor training and academic writing autonomy

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Background to the research

The number of scientific publications by Brazilian researchers in quality journals and conference proceedings outside Brazil is still low. One of the reasons for this is that researchers wishing to disseminate their work internationally are required to publish in English. The English necessary to communicate research is not the general English taught in schools and language institutes, but what is known as academic English.

Academic English has its own specific vocabulary, sentence structure and text organization, which takes time to assimilate. However, only a small minority of Brazilian researchers have the opportunity to work or study in an English-speaking institution where they can develop their knowledge of academic English naturally. Therefore, for Brazilian researchers to improve their writing and increase the number of articles they publish internationally, they would benefit from dedicated academic English writing support.

Although there are academic English courses in Brazilian universities, the English tutors teaching them generally have little experience of academic writing and are not familiar with the specific areas of expertise of researchers. Hence, Brazilian English teachers too need support.

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To address this issue, the present project aimed to promote the internationalization of Brazilian research by helping both researchers and English teachers at the same time.

What the researchers did

To achieve our objectives, we planned an intensive, three-day academic English writing hands-on workshop for researchers and English teachers in Brazil, which was delivered four times - twice at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS, Porto Alegre), and another two times at São Paulo State University (UNESP, Sao Jose do Rio Preto) - in April and June 2019.

A total of 125 applicants (72 researchers and 53 English teachers) participated. They were selected on the basis of their level of English, motivation, and commitment to attend all three days of the workshop. The workshops were held in computer-labs, where participants learned to use online tools and resources to enhance their writing. Although the places available in the UFRGS and UNESP computers labs were limited, to maximise the number of participants, we accepted candidates who volunteered to bring their own devices.

We adopted a collaborative and data-driven approach to language learning. It was collaborative in the sense that researchers and English teachers were encouraged to work together and learn from each other. In this way, researchers could benefit from having an English teacher sitting next to them to discuss language questions that emerged, while English teachers could gain experience in helping researchers produce better scientific texts. Our approach was also data-driven, because we taught researchers and teachers how to get the answers to questions about academic English autonomously, through the use of state-of-the-art corpus linguistics tools and resources that draw on large quantities of authentic language data.

The workshops began with an overview of differences between general and academic English, focusing on the specific vocabulary, sentence structure and textual organization of journal abstracts and scientific articles. This was followed by an introduction to a selection of tools and resources aimed at: (1) helping researchers improve their academic English writing autonomously; and (2) equipping English teachers with materials they could consult in order to teach academic English.

The following corpus linguistics tools and resources that draw on large quantities of authentic language data were covered in days 1 and 2 of the workshop:

- Macmillan Dictionary
- Academic Phrasebank
- ColloCaid
- SkELL

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- [Sketch Engine](#) (using the British National Corpus, the English Web 15 corpus, and self- compiled corpora of exemplary research articles in each researcher's field)

After being introduced to the above, participants worked in pairs or groups of three (researchers plus teachers) as they practiced using the new tools/resources hands-on. This was done through step-by- step exercises at first, followed by free activities in which participants were encouraged to find solutions to authentic questions arising from their experience of writing academic texts or teaching academic English. At the end of each activity, there was a group discussion where participants shared problems, solutions and ideas.

Day 3 of the workshop was split in two. The morning session was a writing retreat, where the researchers were asked to draft an academic text (an abstract, or a section of a journal article or book chapter) or revise an existing draft they had previously written. They had to do this using the tools and resources seen in days 1-2 and in consultation with a partner English teacher. The session concluded with a group discussion and a feedback questionnaire for the researchers, after which they were free to leave. The afternoon session was for the English teachers only. It began with a discussion of problems of teaching academic writing and how they could use the tools, resources and the data- driven approach seen in the workshop to enhance their language and language-teaching skills. They were then asked to prepare an activity or exercise for teaching academic writing and present it to the class for discussion. The workshop concluded with a feedback questionnaire for the English teachers.

What the researchers found

- With 272 applications in total, demand for the workshops was more than twice the number of places we were able to offer (125).

- The workshops attracted applications from 30 different higher education institutions in Brazil, and from researchers from a wide range of disciplines.

- The applicants selected were from UFRGS and UNESP-Rio Preto, plus another 14 institutions. This included participants who travelled to Porto Alegre and Sao Jose do Rio Preto especially for the workshops. Some participants travelled from other states and some commuted more than 200 kilometres per day to attend.

- The researchers attending the workshops were at different points in their academic careers: Lecturers & Professors (21), Postdoctoral Fellows (1),

PhD Students (32) and Masters Students (18). They worked in different fields:
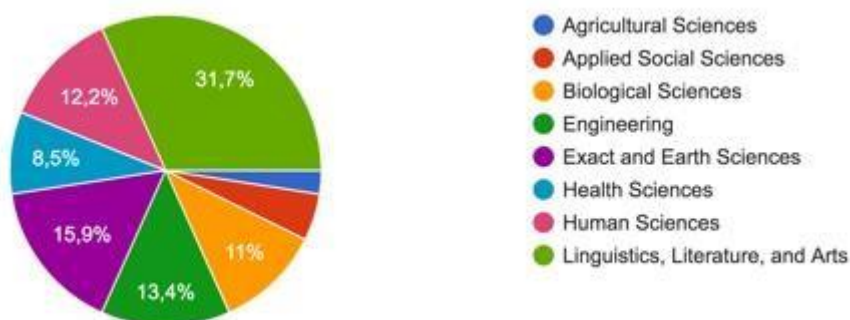
- Initial feedback (collected via anonymous end-of-workshop questionnaires) was very encouraging: the workshops exceeded (76.9%) or met (23.0%) the expectations of the researchers, and exceeded (54.7%) or met (45.2%) the expectations of the English teachers.

- When asked how they rated the workshop contents and materials on a scale of 1 to 5 (disappointing to excellent), the average scores obtained were 4.72 (researchers) and 4.85 (teachers). When asked how likely they would recommend the workshop to their colleagues on a scale of 1 to 5 (very unlikely to very likely), the average scores were 4.94 (researchers) and 4.96 (teachers).

Things to consider

- A good number of academics expressed interest in attending the workshops but were unable to do so because of the three-day time commitment expected from them. We believe more academics would have participated had the workshops not taken up so many hours of their time.

- The researchers who seemed the most engaged were the ones who were in the process of writing a paper for publication whilst attending the workshop. Some researchers chose to carry on working on their texts in the second half of day 3, after they had been dispensed. One researcher even changed his travel arrangements back home so that he could stay longer.

- The level of English of a few English teachers was lower than that of some of the researchers they were asked to support. These teachers had to be paired up with more proficient/experienced teachers so that they could learn from them too.

- The overall feedback received was slightly better for the June

workshops. This could be because the workshop leaders were able to draw from the experience acquired in the April workshops.

- We already know, from personal communication, that one computer scientist has submitted an article he revised during the workshop to a top journal in his field. We plan to collect delayed feedback six months after the workshops to assess longer-term effects of the programme.

- It is important to note that there was little time to advertise the workshops. The first two workshops took place only a couple of weeks after they were announced, while the second two were advertised for less than one month. Had more time been available, we believe applications would have soared. There is a genuine demand for workshops like these in Brazil.

- It is hoped that the four workshops we were able to deliver should nevertheless generate a ripple effect among participating researchers (who can share what they have learned with their groups) and teachers (who will be better prepared for teaching academic English to other researchers), thus outliving the project and reaching a much wider audience.

Acknowledgements