

Exemplification in student assignment genres: A local grammar analysis within the British Academic Written English corpus

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While the local grammar analysis of exemplification in academic discourse has recently gained scholarly attention (Su & Zhang, 2020), it has only focused on two conventional research genres, i.e., research articles (e.g., Su et al., 2021) and degree dissertations (e.g., Su & Lu, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, no study has explored the developmental patterns in students' use of exemplification across various assignment genres, nor has it examined the related cross-generic variations. To fill in this gap, the present study adopts a local grammar approach to explore students' patterned use of exemplification based on the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. The BAWE corpus is a well-designed, comprehensive resource totaling around 6.5 million words and encompassing a wide variety of student assignment genres such as Critiques, Methodology Recounts, and Essays, spanning four different levels of study and a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. Specifically, the present study has two main objectives: (1) to systematically profile students' use of exemplification patterns in the entire BAWE corpus; and (2) to compare students' use of exemplification patterns across five dominant assignment genres (i.e., Essay, Methodology Recount, Critique, Explanation, and Case Study).

The results suggest that a total of 42 local grammar patterns of exemplification have been identified from 13,900 instances extracted from the BAWE corpus. High-proficient student writers demonstrate a preference for employing Pattern1 (PA1) (Exemplified + Indicator + Exemplification-Subcategory (Exemplification-SC)) as their primary exemplification strategy in their assignments. More importantly, the local grammar analyses reveal a certain level of richness and diversity in the exemplification strategies employed by these student writers across their assignment genres, while also highlighting an apparent overconcentration on a select group of the most frequently used exemplification patterns. Other noteworthy features of student writers' use of exemplification in their assignments include a marked preference for the active voice of performative verbs, a combined use of the "Exemplification-SC" and "Supporting Statement" elements, and a tendency to favor patterns incorporating the "Exemplification-SC" element over those containing the "Exemplification-RS" element.

In terms of cross-generic comparisons, notable commonalities and variations in the use of exemplification patterns have been observed across the five dominant student-written coursework assignment genres. Regarding cross-generic commonalities, there is a clear overreliance on the prototypical pattern PA1 among these five assignment genres, coupled with a disproportionately low frequency of a

diverse range of more complex and varied patterns. This may indicate the limited exemplification strategies used by student writers and their restricted awareness of the need to diversify their exemplification patterns.

Regarding cross-generic variations, the Explanation genre exhibits the highest density of exemplification patterns, followed closely by Critique, Essay, and Case Study, whereas Methodology Recount shows the lowest density. Among the 39 identified exemplification patterns across these five dominant assignment genres, only 13 are shared, with significant but relatively weak differences noted in just five of the patterns, mainly PA1 and a few of its variants. Moreover, significant differences in the density of PA1 are observed across each pair of comparisons among the five assignment genres, except for those involving Essay and Critique, Explanation and Case Study, and Critique and Case Study. Concerning the patterns with the co-occurrence of the “Exemplification-SC” and “Supporting Statement” elements, PA2 (Exemplified + Indicator + Exemplification-SC + Supporting Statement) and PA4 (Exemplified + Exemplification-SC + Indicator + Supporting Statement) exhibit different disciplinary preferences. PA4 is generally used far less frequently than PA2 across the five dominant assignment genres, although it is employed significantly more often in the Essay genre compared to the other four genres. In contrast, PA2 is least used in the Methodology Recount genre while being most frequently employed in the Explanation genre. This difference aligns with the distinct nature, goals, communicative functions, and expectations associated with these assignment genres.

To recapitulate, this study affirms the value of local grammar in contrastive discourse act studies and its feasibility for integration with specialized genre studies to explore “restricted language” in specialized contexts (Firth, 1968). Pedagogical applications should focus on teaching genre-appropriate exemplification techniques tailored to the specific needs of various disciplines, thereby empowering students to effectively meet academic standards across different genres and levels.

References

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