

Reference, Coherence and Complexity in Students' Academic Writing: Examples from Cameroon and East-Africa corpus

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ABSTRACT

This contribution discusses problems of students' academic writing in Africa. It sketches the wide field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and argues that reference, coherence and complexity are key concepts for evaluating student writing at university level. It uses material from African corpora to substantiate this claim and to illustrate how authentic language samples can be used in teaching to improve students' academic writing.

1. INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC WRITING

In contexts where English is used as a second language (ESL), like "Anglophone" Africa, academic writing is usually a difficult task not only for novice writers (Nkemleke 2008), but to some extent also for most practising teachers and researchers (Nkemleke 2010). While it may be easy to distinguish impressionistically a good academic piece of writing from a bad or "clumsy" one (Hoey 2006: 48) when presented with the two, it is not always easy to identify precisely the objective criteria that make a text "academic" – let alone to teach these criteria. For one thing, academic writing is not a homogenous concept but has to be distinguished according to level and addressees. For another, the acquisition of it implies an initiation into the culture and practices of various "discourse communities" (Swales 1990). From a social constructionist point of view, "writing is always a personal and socio-cultural act of identity whereby writers both signal their membership in a range of communities, as well as express their own creative presence"