Too chatty: Learner academic writing and register variation
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[DRAFT]

Abstract

The study reported on in this paper uses corpus data in order to examine how upper-intermediate to advanced EFL learners from a wide range of mother tongue backgrounds perform a number of rhetorical functions particularly prominent in academic discourse, and how this compares with native academic writing. In particular, it is shown that one of the problems experienced by EFL learners is that they tend to use features that are more typical of speech than of academic prose, which suggests that they are largely unaware of register differences. Four possible explanations are offered to account for this register confusion, namely the influence of speech, L1 transfer, teaching-induced factors and developmental factors.

1. Introduction

Flowerdew (2001) highlights three areas of difficulty in learner academic writing, viz. collocational patterning, pragmatic appropriacy and discourse features. Collocational patterning has to do with learners’ lack of familiarity with the typical lexico-grammatical environment of words (e.g. *We have performed a survey, *A questionnaire has been conveyed to the public). Pragmatic appropriacy concerns the writer’s attitude to his/her message, as realised through modal verbs, modal adjuncts, boosters, hedges, etc. Hyland & Milton (1997), for example, have shown that Cantonese learners have considerable difficulty conveying an appropriate degree of qualification in their academic essays. In this paper, we will focus on the third area of difficulty, namely discourse features, and more specifically on “the ‘discourse value’ of lexical and structural items in context” (Flowerdew 2001: 374) – although pragmatic inappropriacy will also emerge from the analysis, as a consequence of the overuse, underuse or misuse of some discourse features. In particular, we will investigate the extent to which upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English use spoken-like features in their academic prose. While this tendency has already been brought to light for specific
words and for learners from a number of mother tongue (L1) backgrounds, as will be briefly shown in Section 2, we will demonstrate in Section 3 that this is actually a more general problem, concerning learners from many L1 populations and pertaining to many of the rhetorical functions that serve to organise academic discourse. In Section 4, we will provide four possible explanations for this lack of register-awareness, namely the influence of speech, L1 transfer, teaching-induced factors and developmental factors.

2. Learners’ confusion of registers

While language has long been seen as a basically unitary phenomenon, corpus-based studies such as Biber’s (1988) have brought to light the great variation that exists within a language. Different genres have different characteristics, and speech cannot be fully described by a grammar of the written language (see e.g. Carter & McCarthy 1995 for English). Producing a text in a given genre therefore requires what Lorenz (1999: 64) calls “text-type sensitivity”. As underlined by Lorenz and others, however, non-native writers often lack such sensitivity and may struggle to find an appropriate voice, that is, a style that is suitable for a particular text type.

In particular, it has been repeatedly noted that learners often do not respect the differences between speech and writing, and that the devices they use “can give confusing signals of register” (Field & Yip 1992: 26). Thus, using a fully automatic method of investigation, Granger & Rayson (1998) have shown that French-speaking learners overuse many lexical and grammatical features typical of speech, such as first and second person pronouns or short Germanic adverbs (also, only, so, very, etc.), and significantly underuse many of the characteristics of formal writing, such as a high density of nouns and prepositions. Other studies, focusing on more specific items, have brought to light the same problem. For example, Lorenz (1999) discusses the marked overuse of the conjunction because and the adverb so in German learner writing; French, Spanish and Swedish learners’ heavy reliance on I think to express their personal opinion is reported by Granger (1998), Neff et al. (2007) and Aijmer (2002) respectively; foreign learners’ overuse of of course is highlighted by Narita & Sugiura (2006) for Japanese, Granger & Tyson (1996) for French and Altenberg & Tapper (1998) for Swedish.

In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, which focus on learners from one or two L1 populations, the current study examines learners from a large number of mother tongue
backgrounds. It takes as a starting point the expression of rhetorical functions in academic writing, as explained in the next section.

3. Spoken-like features in academic discourse functions

When writing an academic essay, one has to fulfil a number of rhetorical functions in order to organise one’s discourse. These functions include: expressing possibility and certainty, introducing new topics, establishing causal links, quoting other people’s work and concluding a piece of writing. Within the framework of a close collaboration between the Centre for English Corpus Linguistics (Université catholique de Louvain) and Macmillan Education on the second edition of the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, we studied twelve of these functions and compared the way they are performed in native and non-native academic English (Gilquin et al. 2007; see also Gilquin et al. in press for a detailed description of this project). In this section, we will focus on what this comparison tells us in terms of register, and more particularly, how learners’ performance can be situated along the speech-writing continuum.

3.1. Data and methodology

Our study started with the collection of a number of words and phrases used in rhetorical functions particularly prominent in academic writing. A large proportion of the lexical items examined come from Paquot’s (2007) *Academic Keyword List*. Paquot applied a number of criteria including keyness, range and evenness of distribution (cf. Rayson 2003) on three corpora of academic texts from several disciplines (e.g. arts, social science, applied science, technology and engineering) to select EAP-specific words and phrases, i.e. a rather formal vocabulary common to a wide range of academic texts from different disciplines. The *Academic Keyword List* includes 930 lemmas, examples of which are given in Table 1. From this list, we selected words and phrases which are used to perform one of the following functions: adding information, comparing and contrasting, exemplifying, expressing cause and effect, expressing personal opinion, introducing a concession, introducing topics and related ideas, listing items, reformulating, quoting and reporting, summarizing and drawing conclusions. We added certain items which did not emerge from Paquot’s (2007) corpus-driven analysis but are commonly mentioned in academic textbooks as serving specific
rhetorical functions (e.g. *in brief*, *in a nutshell* or *all in all* for summarizing and drawing conclusions). The final list of words and phrases for this study included a total of about 350 items.

**Table 1** about here

The use of these lexical items was then analysed and compared in three different corpora, namely a corpus of academic native English, a corpus of spoken native English and a corpus of learner English. The native data come from the academic and spoken components of the British National Corpus (BNC), totalling 15 million and 10 million words, respectively. The academic corpus (BNC-W) consists of samples from books and journal articles in several disciplines, e.g. humanities and arts, medicine, natural science, politics, law and education. The spoken corpus (BNC-S) includes a wide variety of spoken registers, among which broadcast documentary and news, interviews and lectures. The learner data come from the second version of ICLE, the International Corpus of Learner English (Granger et al., forthcoming), which includes 3.5 million words of academic writing – argumentative and literary essays - produced by upper-intermediate to advanced¹ foreign learners from 16 mother tongue backgrounds belonging to different language families (e.g. French, Chinese, Norwegian, Turkish). ICLE is encoded with many learner and task variables (see Granger 2003). Because settings are extremely important in learner writing, as convincingly demonstrated by Ådel (forthcoming), we limited our analysis to argumentative essays written in untimed conditions and with access to reference tools. These criteria reduced our sample to some 1.5 million words and 14 L1 subcorpora (two of the components, the Bulgarian and Tswana components, did not contain enough data meeting the criteria and were therefore left out). The 14 subcorpora are the following: Chinese (ICLE-CH), Czech (ICLE-CZ), Dutch (ICLE-DU), Finnish (ICLE-FI), French (ICLE-FR), German (ICLE-GE), Italian (ICLE-IT), Japanese (ICLE-JP), Norwegian (ICLE-NO), Polish (ICLE-PO), Russian (ICLE-RU), Spanish (ICLE-SP), Swedish (ICLE-SW) and Turkish (ICLE-TU).

Researchers such as Lorenz (1999) and Hyland & Milton (1997) criticise the use of professional writing in learner corpus research, arguing that it is “both unfair and descriptively inadequate” (Lorenz 1999: 14) and taking a stand against the “unrealistic

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¹ Learners’ level in ICLE was determined on the basis of external criteria (the students were in their third or fourth year of university study). Assessing some 200 texts from ICLE on the basis of internal criteria revealed proficiency levels ranging from B2 to C2 in the Common European Framework (but with a majority of C1), cf. Granger & Thewissen (2005).
standard of ‘expert writer’ models’ (Hyland & Milton 1997: 184). Native student writing is arguably a better type of comparable data to EFL learner writing if the objective of the comparison is to describe and evaluate interlanguage(s) as fairly as possible. It is, however, highly questionable whether findings from such comparisons can make their way into the classroom. As Leech (1998: xix) puts it, “[n]ative-speaking students do not necessarily provide models that everyone would want to imitate”. For example, native students have been shown to produce more dangling participles than EFL learners (Granger 1997) and different types of orthographic errors (Cutting 2000). The question of the norm can be settled by taking into account the aim of the comparison. Professional writing has a major role to play in learner corpus research as soon as pedagogical applications are considered. As noted by Ädel (2006: 206-207):

On the one hand, it can be argued that in order to evaluate foreign learner writing by students justly, we need to use native-speaker writing that is also produced by students for comparison. On the other hand, it can also be argued that professional writing represents the norm that advanced foreign learner writers try to reach and their teachers try to promote. In this respect, a useful corpus for comparison is one which offers a collection of what Bazerman (1994: 131) calls ‘expert performances’.

We nevertheless agree with De Cock’s (2003: 196) comment that “argumentative essay writing has no exact equivalent in professional writing”. Special care will thus be taken to interpret results in the light of genre analysis, as differences between student essays and expert writing may simply reflect differences in their communicative goals and settings (cf. Neff et al. 2004).

The frequencies of the selected words and phrases in the 14 subcorpora of ICLE were compared to those of the same items in the written and spoken native corpora, which made it possible to highlight cases of overuse (when learners use more of a particular item than native speakers) and underuse (when they use less of a particular item than native speakers). Our objective was to identify cases of overuse and underuse that are shared by learners from a wide range of mother tongue backgrounds and which can be used to inform generic pedagogical tools. In what follows, we report on some of the register-related problems that were found to characterise a majority of the learner corpora.

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2 It is important to note that the terms “overuse” and “underuse” are descriptive, not prescriptive, terms: they merely refer to the fact that a linguistic form is found significantly more or less in the learner corpus than in the reference corpus. Chi square tests were performed in order to establish the statistical significance of these under- and overuses.
3.2. Some results

The analysis of the learner data and their comparison with the written and spoken native corpora reveal a strong tendency among learners, regardless of their mother tongue, to use spoken-like features in their written production. They tend to overuse words and phrases which are more likely to appear in speech, and underuse more formal expressions typical of academic writing. In addition, they sometimes use conjunctions in positions favoured by spoken registers, rather than academic prose.

A first example of EFL learners’ tendency to use spoken-like items in their academic essays is found in the way learners express possibility, and more particularly, in the distribution of the adverbs perhaps and maybe. As appears from Figure 1, perhaps is much more common in native academic writing than maybe (347 occurrences of perhaps per million words [pmw] vs. 13 maybe pmw). A comparison of academic texts reveals that, although frequencies may differ significantly across academic disciplines, perhaps is always more frequent than maybe (e.g. in humanities: 550 perhaps pmw vs. 19.6 maybe pmw; in medicine: 160.3 perhaps pmw vs. 2.8 maybe pmw; in natural science: 218.6 perhaps pmw vs. 5.4 maybe pmw). Learner writing, however, exhibits just the opposite tendency, with a higher relative frequency of maybe than of perhaps (342 maybe pmw vs. 285 perhaps pmw). Since, as the graph shows, maybe is more prominent in speech than in writing, learners may be said to favour an adverb that is more typical of speech than of writing, as illustrated by (1). Perhaps, by comparison, is less frequently used, although it would be better suited to express possibility in academic writing, as would a whole range of lexical items, also underused by the learners, including apparently, it seems that or it is possible that.

Figure 1 about here

(1) In general, maybe English really is slightly easier to learn than other languages but it is not as simple that one can learn it overnight3. (ICLE-PO)

More generally, the corpus analysis reveals that learners usually underuse items that express possibility (e.g. apparently, presumably, likely, assumption), but overuse items expressing certainty. This is particularly clear in the case of adverbs, with adverbs such as

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3 Learners’ sentences are reprinted as they appear in ICLE, with no corrections made to their writing.
really, of course, certainly, absolutely or definitely figuring much more prominently in learner writing than in native writing, as schematised in Figure 2 and exemplified in (2) and (3). Again, as Figure 2 shows, these amplifying adverbs are typical of speech. In academic writing, by contrast, they are less frequently used, which can be related to the fact that “[a]cademic writing is typically cautious: sweeping generalizations are avoided and instead claims are limited or qualified” (Blanpain 2006: 45). Tentativeness, with the use of so-called hedges, has a key role in academic writing. By making room for other positions than the one advocated by the writer, it helps create good relationships between the writer and the reader, while at the same time allowing the writer to avoid “personal accountability for statements” (Hyland 1994: 240). For these reasons, “[l]earning to use hedging devices appropriately, without becoming over-tentative, is an essential academic skill” (Blanpain 2006: 45).

Figure 2 about here

(2) Do you think father of the baby can tolerate for a long time for the cries of the baby. I think the answer is clear; of course not, is not it? But mother can tolerate of course. Mothers have deeper feeling of mercy and they will absolutely try the baby to stop crying. (ICLE-TU)

(3) So unfortunately money really takes a very important, supreme part in our life. And we certainly can not talk about freedom in the world until we understand how much evil depends on this role of money. (ICLE-RU)

Another issue which learners seem to have problems with is the extent to which they should be visible as writers. As noted by Recski (2004), in the case of argumentative essays such as those contained in ICLE, “personal references and subjective attitudes are certainly hard to avoid”, since learners are explicitly prompted to give their personal opinions (topics for the essays include: “Some people say that in our modern world, dominated by science, technology and industrialism, there is no longer place for dreaming and imagination. What is your opinion?” and “In the 19th century, Victor Hugo said: ‘How sad it is to think that nature is calling out but humanity refuses to pay heed.’ Do you think it is still true nowadays?”). It should be borne in mind, however, that personal opinions are present in academic prose too. By using impersonal structures such as it is reasonable to and it is worth noting that, or adverbs such as interestingly or surprisingly, professional writers express their attitude towards their message. Learners, by contrast, tend to make their presence strongly felt in their
writing. They often express personal opinions with the phrase *it seems to me*, as in (4) and (5), where native speakers would probably use the simple expression *it seems* instead, cf. (6). Similarly, they tend to use explicit expressions such as *I think that* or *to my mind*, which are in many cases unnecessary. Even if these expressions were not used in sentences (7) and (8), it would still be clear that the writer is expressing his/her own opinion.

(4) **It seems to me** that being tolerant requires strength of character and also a certain maturity. (ICLE-GE)

(5) **It seems to me** a paradox, I mean what high commands expect and what they sometimes obtain. (ICLE-SP)

(6) **It seems** that these authors see mind as an entity distinct from the processes that support it. (BNC-W)

(7) In conclusion, **I think that** capital punishment is not the most effective way to punish murderers. (ICLE-CH)

(8) Others exaggerate dieting in order to keep their slender figure. **To my mind** it is stupid to slim down until you are emaciated. (ICLE-GE)

Learners are also often too visible when introducing new topics or ideas. They frequently use the expression *I would like / want / am going to talk about…*, as illustrated in (9). Native writers, on the other hand, prefer more impersonal devices, e.g. *this article examines…* or *topics addressed will include…*.

(9) The next effect **I would like to talk about** is social contact and it is best illustrated by these words: “before I bought my dog I did not know my neighbours, but now everybody greets me and my dog.” (ICLE-SW)

This high writer visibility is more characteristic of speech than of writing. The expressions *it seems to me* and *I would like / want / am going to talk about…*, for example, are very frequent in speech, but much less so in academic writing, as Figures 3 and 4 show. This, again, may have unfortunate consequences for learner essays peppered with such expressions. As further noted by Recski (2004), because signals of the writer’s presence are typically used in speech to “illustrate the involvement of the speaker in what she or he is saying”, their use in writing “provoke[s] similar feelings in the readers (…). The readers feel that the writer is somehow involved in the text and automatically attribute the writer of the (otherwise
impersonal) text with personal, subjective emotions and attitudes – as they would attribute them to a speaker they could see or hear” (ibid.). By avoiding such signals, one can help develop the “sense of impersonal objectivity” (ibid.) that is expected of academic prose.

Figure 3 about here

Figure 4 about here

Learners’ tendency to favour more spoken-like features may also concern the positioning of words. While Conrad (1999) suggests that the unmarked position for linking adverbials in both conversation and academic prose is at the beginning of a sentence, some items show different preferences depending on register. Thus, and is rarely used sentence-initially in academic prose, but this position is very common in speech, as Figure 5 makes clear. Learners, by overusing the sentence-initial positioning, cf. (10), therefore give an oral tone to their essays.

Figure 5 about here

(10) Some soldiers were sent there even without knowing, where they were going. And some soldiers even couldn’t shoot well.

Interestingly, most of the rhetorical functions we examined turn out to be characterised in learners’ essays by a number of items which are more typical of speech than of writing (see Paquot 2007). Table 2 summarises these findings, and sentences (11) to (13) give some examples from ICLE. In the next section, we will try to understand why learner writing exhibits so many of these spoken-like features.

Table 2 about here

(11) For instance when I watch movies like “The Godfather” or “The Untouchables” I often drift into dreams of being either Michael Corleone (The Godfather) or Al Capone (The Untouchables). (ICLE-NO)
4. Explaining the spoken-like nature of learner writing

In what follows, we will put forward four possible explanations to account for the spoken-like nature of learner writing. We will start with what may seem to be the most straightforward explanation, the influence of the spoken medium, and will argue that it is not a very likely explanation in this case. We will then present three other explanations – which are not mutually exclusive – namely the influence of the mother tongue, the influence of teaching and the effect of developmental factors.

4.1. The influence of speech

Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) have been shown to borrow oral strategies in their writing (see Schleppegrell 1996 or Hinkel 2003). One reason for this seems to be that those students “have learned English primarily through oral interaction, rather than through instruction” (Schleppegrell 1996: 274). When attempting to write academic discourse, they resort to what they know best, namely speech, which results in features inappropriate for academic writing.

The situation is quite different for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), who mainly learn English through instruction. For them, spoken input tends to be restricted to teacher talk and oral teaching materials. Teacher talk may be relatively limited, depending on the teaching method (use of the mother tongue or not, focus on form or on communicative competence). In addition, for many learners teacher talk is non-native teacher talk, and a non-native teacher is at best a near-native speaker, whose discourse may display less lexical density and less lexical sophistication than a native speaker (Waller 1993), and who may have problems with collocations or, for that matter, registers. As for oral teaching materials, they are often unauthentic (cf. Gilmore 2004 or Römer 2004), and the little authentic materials that are available to students in the classroom tend to take the form of broadcast news, that is, a very formal and carefully prepared type of speech, quite different from spontaneous
conversations. The influence of speech on EFL writing therefore appears as a less convincing explanation and we may be slightly surprised that Lorenz (1999) offers it as his main argument to account for the spoken-like causal markers he observes in German learners’ writing. This does not mean, however, that the influence of speech should be ruled out altogether. In fact, in some contexts, spoken English does have a place in learners’ everyday life. Thus, in the Netherlands, students are exposed to spoken (or at least written-to-be-spoken) English through television programmes, which are subtitled, not dubbed (see de Haan 2002: 112). Even in countries where television programmes are dubbed, it looks as if new technologies like the Internet are making informal and more oral-like registers of English more accessible to young people. However, given that the learner populations represented in ICLE do not all live in an “English-friendly” environment and that the Web had little impact in the 1990s, when most of the ICLE subcorpora were collected, other explanations have to be sought for the spoken-like nature of learner academic writing.

4.2. L1 transfer

The influence of the mother tongue on learner language has been demonstrated by many studies, and there is no doubt, today, that “transfer is one of the major factors shaping the learner’s interlanguage competence and performance” (Kohn 1986: 21). Yet, little has been said about the possible influence of L1 in terms of register. Paquot (in press), using the example of the first imperative plural form, shows that a phenomenon of “transfer of register” seems to be at work in the case of French-speaking learners. Figure 6 shows that *let’s/let us* is more typical of speech than of writing. It also shows that, while it is overused by learners from most mother tongue backgrounds, this overuse is particularly striking among French-speaking learners, who use the imperative even more than in native speech.

Figure 6 about here

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4 “Written-to-be-spoken” refers for example to conversations in TV series, which are close to spontaneous speech, but still differ from it in a number of respects.
Figure 7, which gives the relative frequency of first imperative plural verbs in French school essays, French editorials and comparable data in English,\(^5\) suggests that this overuse of *let’s/let us* in French EFL learners’ essays may well be the result of L1 transfer, since imperatives appear to be much more frequent in written French, where they are used with many different verbs to structure discourse, e.g. (14) to (16). In fact, a comparison of Figures 6 and 7 reveals that the relative frequency of the first imperative plural form in native French is very similar to that of *let’s/let us* in the French component of ICLE, which confirms the hypothesis of a transfer of register.

*Figure 7 about here*

(14) *Prenons l’exemple des sorciers ou des magiciens au Moyen Age.* (CODIF)  
‘Let us take the example of wizards or magicians in the Middle Ages’

(15) *Envisageons tout d’abord la question économique.* (CODIF)  
‘Let us first consider economic issues’

(16) *Pensons, par exemple, à l’Espagne, qui, pendant quatre à huit siècles, a appris à côtoyer les peuples arabes.* (CODIF)  
‘Let us think, for example, about Spain which, for four to eight centuries, learnt to live with the Arab people’

However, the very fact that the imperative form is also overused by learners from other mother-tongue backgrounds which do not make use of first person plural imperative verbs to organise written academic discourse (e.g. Dutch, with its very low frequency of 16.3 imperatives pmw in data from the TRILLED corpus) proves that transfer cannot be the sole explanation and that other factors must also have a role to play (cf. Paquot 2007). Among these are teaching-induced and developmental factors, which are described in the next two sections.

**4.3. Teaching-induced factors**

\(^5\) The French school essays come from the *Corpus de Dissertations Françaises* (CODIF), while the English school essays come from the LOCNESS corpus (see later). The French and English editorials are part of the TRILLED corpus (*TRILingual Louvain corpus of Editorials*).
Sometimes, the emergence of spoken-like features seems to be due to the teaching process itself. Most often recognised in the literature is the pernicious influence of undifferentiated lists of connectors found in textbooks, as in the following extract, taken from Jordan (1999):

**Figure 8 about here**

Such lists have been criticised for giving the misleading impression that the connectors are synonymous (see e.g. Crewe 1990: 317-318; Milton & Tsang 1993: 231-232). They have also been criticised for giving the impression that connective devices appear in sentence-initial position only (Milton 1999). An additional problem with these lists is that the connectors are not differentiated in terms of register:

Students are drilled in the categorical use of a short list of expressions – often those functioning as connectives or alternatively those which are colourful and complicated (and therefore impressive) – regardless of whether they are used primarily in spoken or written language (if indeed at all), or to which text types they are appropriate (Milton 1998: 190).

With no explanation to resort to, the learner is likely to deduce that, say, *so* is just as appropriate as *consequently* or *therefore* in an academic essay, while it is in fact more characteristic of speech.

The teaching-induced factor is also at work in lists of translational equivalents such as those found in bilingual dictionaries. Below are some of the expressions found in the “essay writing” section of the French-English bilingual dictionary *Robert & Collins Senior* (1998):

(17) Il était très mécontent, aussi a-t-il démissionné
     = … and so he …

(18) Prenons comme point de départ…
     = Let us take … as a starting point

(19) N’oublions pas que…
     = Let us not forget that…

The use of the connector *so* to express a consequence is more typical of spoken interactions than of academic prose, as noted earlier. As for the first imperative plural form, it is much less common in academic writing than in speech (see Figure 6) and its use in academic writing is
lexically restricted to a few verbs such as consider or examine (see Swales et al. 1998). In the Robert & Collins Senior dictionary, by contrast, French imperatives are almost systematically translated into English by means of the let us form, no matter what the verb is. Such translations, presumably, distort learners’ sense of what is stylistically appropriate or not.

4.4. Developmental factors

A fourth explanation for the presence of spoken-like features in learner writing, which may go unnoticed in a comparison such as this one, using expert writing as a point of comparison, is the influence of what may be referred to as developmental factors. In other words, some of the features highlighted above are not (solely) due to the non-nativeness of the subjects, but to the fact that they are novice writers, who have not quite acquired the rules of academic writing yet and lack knowledge of more formal alternatives to structure their discourse.

In order to study the role played by developmental factors, we compared the learner data with similar data produced by native students (i.e. novice writers). The corpus we used is the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS; see Granger 1996), which contains about 300,000 words of academic writing produced by British and American students. The analysis of LOCNESS reveals that, while native students do better than non-native students with respect to lexico-grammar and phraseology, they share learners’ problem with register to a certain extent, overusing items which are more typical of speech than of writing. When compared with learner writing, (expert) academic writing and speech, novice writing often appears to occupy an intermediate position between academic writing and learner writing, with speech coming last. This cline is very clear in Figures 9 and 10, which present the relative frequencies of maybe and I think, respectively, in the four corpora. Both native and non-native students overuse these spoken-like items, although the overuse is more marked in learner writing than in novice writing. In addition, preliminary analyses on different components of LOCNESS point to the existence of a cline among native students, with A-level students favouring spoken-like features more than university students. All this suggests that an oral tone in writing is not limited to foreign learners, but is actually very much part of the process of becoming an expert writer.

Figure 9 about here

Figure 10 about here
5. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine the written production of upper-intermediate to advanced foreign learners of English and to situate it along the speech-writing continuum. We saw that learner academic writing, whatever the learner’s mother tongue, exhibits many characteristics of speech, not only in terms of overuse or underuse of some items, but also with respect to the positioning of certain words. Several explanations may be put forward to account for learners’ “chatty” style. These include the influence of speech, L1 transfer, lack of knowledge of more formal alternatives, teaching-induced and developmental factors. It should be emphasised, however, that it is often difficult to pinpoint which factor is responsible for a particular spoken-like characteristic. Most of the time, it seems more reasonable to invoke a “complex interplay of factors” (Granger 2004: 135), with each factor reinforcing the effect of the other factors. If we want to gain more insight into the spoken-like nature of learner writing, it will therefore be necessary to carry out studies integrating these different factors, not as independent, but as interrelated variables.

Another possible improvement would be the use of corpora representing an even wider range of genres and text types than were available for this study. In particular, there is an urgent need for learner corpora which represent academic text types other than argumentative essays (cf. projects such as the British Academic Written Corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers). Such corpora would make it possible to control for task type effects, better than was the case in this study. Learner corpus research would also greatly benefit from the design of comparable corpora of L1 and L2 writing produced by the same learners, since one cannot reasonably expect EFL learners to produce good academic texts in English if they are not able to perform such a complex task in their mother tongue in the first place.

Such improvements (and others) are necessary if we want to take studies like this one a step further and gain a better understanding of learners’ attraction towards speech. We will then be ready for the final step, namely the preparation of appropriate remedial materials that will help learners overcome register-related problems.

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FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1. Relative frequency of *perhaps* and *maybe* in academic writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)

Figure 2. Relative frequency of amplifying adverbs in academic writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)
Figure 3. Relative frequency of *it seems to me* in academic writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)

Figure 4. Relative frequency of *I would like / want / am going to talk about* in academic writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)
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Figure 8. Connectives of result in Jordan (1999: 62)
Figure 9. Relative frequency of *maybe* in academic writing, novice writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)

Figure 10. Relative frequency of *I think* in academic writing, novice writing, learner writing and speech (relative frequency per million words)
Table 1. Examples of EAP-specific words and phrases from Paquot’s (2007) *Academic Keyword List*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical function</th>
<th>Spoken-like overused lexical item</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exemplification</td>
<td>like</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cause and effect</td>
<td>thanks to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that/this is why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison and contrast</td>
<td>look like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concession</td>
<td>sentence-final adverb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>though</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adding information</td>
<td>sentence-initial and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the adverb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>besides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing personal opinion</td>
<td><em>I think</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to my mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>from my point of view</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>it seems to me</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing possibility and certainty</td>
<td><em>really</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>of course</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>absolutely</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>maybe</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introducing topics and ideas</td>
<td><em>I would like to/want/am going to talk about</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>thing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>by the way</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listing items</td>
<td><em>first of all</em></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2. Spoken-like overused lexical items per rhetorical function (Paquot 2007)