

Supporting research communication: an exploratory study of NNES medical writers' awareness of the collocational patterning of abstract nouns in medical discourse

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Research has explored the characteristics of scientific discourse from features such as modality (Widdowson 1979; Banks 1994; Gledhill 2000), hedging (Myers 1989; Swales 1990; Varttala 1999), the use of the passive and the anticipatory *it*-pattern (Swales 1990; Biber et al. 1998/1999; Hyland 2008) to the tendency to use grammatical metaphor (Salager-Meyer 1992; Halliday 1998; Gledhill 2000) and the high use of abstract nouns in the expression of processes and methods (Halliday 1993; Flowerdew 2003). Underpinning this research is an understanding that “[i]n order to understand texts, we must look at them closely to find the lexico-grammatical strategies that they adopt to assist communication within a specialised community” (Williams 2002: 60). Scientific discourse is understood to be “highly stereotypical in nature”, and it seems important that members of this discourse community become familiar with phraseology which might be considered “good scientific style” (Gledhill 2000: 116). It has been argued that in order to produce phraseologically competent texts, typical collocational patterns in that discourse need to be mastered (Gledhill 2000; Flowerdew 2003; Hyland 2008).

This paper reports on a study which aims to investigate if NNES writers, in our case Spanish doctors, who are required to publish in English in medical journals, are aware of the common collocational patterns of abstract nouns that occur in published health science discourse. Twenty-four Spanish doctors completed a worksheet based on the collocational patterning of four abstract nouns (conclusion, comparison, agreement and decision). The analysis of the collocation exercises in the worksheet highlights that the participants were aware of some of the common collocational patterns that occur but still would need support for some others. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on how a health science corpus can be used to help scientists produce phraseologically competent scientific texts.

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