

# The Use of Exemplification in Undergraduate Students' Academic Writing

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# **Abstract**

This study explores the use of Exemplification in undergraduate students' academic writing at a university in Lesotho. Research indicates that Exemplification is a prevalent feature of academic writing. However, it has also been established that learners experience difficulties in forming and using Exemplification effectively. Using a corpus created from research projects written by final year undergraduate students in six faculties at a university in Lesotho, the study examined the use of Exemplification, focusing on the exemplification markers students used, the patterns of exemplification as well as the errors in using exemplification effectively. Findings indicate that students used a limited set of exemplification markers and only a few patterns. It was also observed that students had challenges using exemplification appropriately. The study concludes that there is a need for explicit teaching of Exemplification in EAP classes.

**Keywords**: academic writing, exemplification, metadiscourse.

#### INTRODUCTION

Metadiscourse, generally defined as "discourse about discourse", is regarded as an important part of communication, parallel to, and interactive with propositional material. Without it, text comprehension would be difficult. Metadiscourse is based on the view that there are two levels of communication which take place simultaneously in a communicative event(Vande Kopple 1985). On one level, the writer communicates information or propositional content. On the other level, the level of metadiscourse, the writer uses cues to guide the reader through the text and steers him towards the preferred interpretation of the propositional content. The concept has been widely discussed and applied in different academic and non-academic genres, spoken and written. Many models have been proposed and others improved the already existing ones, but they all allude to the fact that metadiscoursal features solve comprehension problems and increase writers' credibility and persuasiveness of texts. In addition, there is a consensus that, metadiscourse has two categories. Some categories help guide readers through the text while others enable the writer to intrude into the text and actively engage the reader, comment on the information and evaluate it. These categories are reproduced below, based on a model proposed by Hyland (2005).



Table1: A model of metadiscourse in academic texts

Category	Function	Examples	
Interactive resources	Help to guide reader through the text		
Transitions	express semantic relation between main clauses	in addition/but/thus/ and	
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages	finally/to conclude/my purpose here is to	
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above/see Fig/in section 2	
Evidentials	refer to source of information from other texts	according to X/(Y, 1990)/Z states	
Code glosses	help readers grasp functions of ideational material	namely/e.g./such as/in other words	
Interactional resources	Involve the reader in the argument		
Hedges	withhold writer's full commitment to proposition	might/perhaps/possible/ about	
Boosters	emphasise force or writer's certainty in proposition	in fact/definitely/it is clear that	
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	unfortunately/I agree/ surprisingly	
Engagement markers	explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader	consider/note that/you can see that	
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I/we/my/our	

The current study is limited to the use of Exemplification, one of the two subcategories of Code Glosses. It is regarded as useful in both oral and written communication, academic and non-academic communication and across languages (Triki2021). Exemplification, as Hyland (2007:270) defines it, is a "communication process through which meaning is clarified or supported by a second unit which illustrates the first by citing

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an example." By using exemplification, the writer, aware of the evolving text and the need to guide the reader through the text, elaborates on the argument or concept made by giving specific examples. In academic communication, for instance, Hyland (2007, p.267) explains that "while every academic text is written to be both understood and accepted and while neither goal is ever completely assured, writers who can successfully predict something of their readers will know of their subject and expect of its presentation are more likely to be convincing." In other words, the reliability of an opinion is questionable unless it is supported by forceful arguments and specific evidence. Exemplification thus increases the chances of the writer's arguments being convincing. Hyland (2007, p.271) for example, in his study of Code Glosses in research articles, observed that examples were 16% more common that reformulations (another category of Code Glosses), thereby "underlying the importance of clarifying proposition through illustrative material". In teaching and learning for instance, Oliveira and Brown (2016, p.737) explain that science teachers use exemplification for various pedagogical ends, such as to develop and clarify important concepts, explain natural phenomenon, give supporting details to general and abstract ideas, engage learners and persuade them. Other studies which emphasise the importance of Exemplification in academic settings are described below:

Su and Zhang (2020) studied the discourse functions of exemplification in Linguistics Research Articles, using the local grammar approach. In this approach, the exemplification markers are analysed and semantic patterns identified. In their study of exemplification, Su and Zhang (2020) found 3315 instances of the use of exemplification and eight exemplification markers, namely, e.g., such as, for example, illustrate, for instance, an example of, exemplify and an instance of. Exemplification was realised in seventeen different structural patterns. The most common pattern was EXEMPLIFIED + INDICATOR+ EXEMPLIFICATION (e.g. Some dictionaries, for example, The American Heritage Dictionary of English Usage...). This structure in which writers exemplify/illustrate a superordinate category by giving examples of subordinate categories accounted for 2544 cases. It is important to highlight that the terms used for the structural analysis are contextspecific and generally self-explanatory. Another recent research on exemplification in Research Articles was conducted by Triki (2021). The study analysed structural, semantic and metadiscoursal features of Exemplification. The three units of exemplification, namely the exemplified unit, exemplification marker and the exemplifying unit were analysed. The exemplified and the exemplifying units were analysed in terms of their grammatical structures (that is, Noun Phrases and Clauses). The exemplifying units were further analysed into types, that is, whether the examples were abstract or concrete, citations, real or hypothetical situations or extracts and passages from other sources.

Some studies examined the whole category of Code Glosses, with Exemplification studied alongside Reformulation. These studies also confirm that Exemplification is an effective metadiscourse strategy to aid comprehension. For instance, Akoto (2014) used Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse to analyse Code Glosses in the Students' Handbook of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. With differing frequencies, he found markers that were used for reformulating (61.61%), defining (18.09%), exemplifying (13.94% and simplifying (6.36%). It can be argued that since the purpose of the students' handbook was to present content in a clear and unambiguous manner especially because the handbook was the students' guide about general governance with consequences for non-compliance, there was more need to reformulate and provide definitions than there was need for many instances of exemplifying. Another study on Code Glosses was conducted by Dehgan and Chalak (2016). They also used Hyland's (2005) model to examine the use of Code Glosses in Research Articles. The articles were written by Iranian and native speakers of English.

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Findings in their study indicate that there was not much difference in the use of Code Glosses. Exemplification accounted for 44% of the total code glosses while it accounted for 45% in the Iranians' articles and in the English L1 speakers' articles respectively.

To conclude, although it has been established from the foregoing discussion that Exemplification is an important strategy to increase text comprehension and persuasiveness, not much attention has been given to its use in students' academic writing, especially as a stand-alone category. It deserves attention mainly because, since students generally write for their lecturers, who decide whether they pass or fail, it is important that they employ effective strategies (including Exemplification) to demonstrate their competence and knowledge of the subject matter. This means that if used appropriately, Exemplification can help students make their writing convincing and persuasive to their lecturers, thereby creating positive impressions which will result in the award of good marks. There is therefore a need to explore how students use Exemplification. Besides, there is concern that learners experience difficulties in forming and using Exemplification (see Siepmann, 2005). This is supported by Karapetyan (2016), who, in a study of exemplification in Armenian students' writing notes that "Using illustrative examples makes a piece of writing convincing, forceful and attractive. However, citing examples is a challenging technique for many students." More research on the use of exemplification in students' academic writing is thus needed to build on the existing body of knowledge on the topic. The aim of this paper is to examine the use of Exemplification in Lesotho university students' academic writing. Specifically, the paper will:

- a) Identify exemplification markers students use
- b) Identify the semantic patterns of exemplification
- c) Identify the grammatical forms of exemplification elements
- d) Identify and explain errors in using exemplification

## **METHOD**

The study used the discussion sections of sixty randomly chosen research projects written by fourth and final year undergraduate students at a university in Lesotho. The projects were written by students in the departments of Agricultural Economics (Faculty of Agriculture), Language and Social Education (Faculty of Education), Nutrition (Faculty of Health Sciences), Historical Studies (Faculty of Humanities), Biology, (Faculty of Science and Technology) and Politics and Administrative Studies (Faculty of Social Sciences). Ten projects from each Department, were chosen. The discussion section was chosen because of its argumentative and persuasive nature. It thus provided a suitable context for the examination of exemplification.

Exemplification markers, derived from the list provided Hyland (2005) and grammar books (e.g. Biber et al 1999; Quirk et al 1985), were searched for by using Wordsmith Tools Version 5, a text analysis and concordance program. This was followed by an in-depth manual analysis to double- check that all instances were Exemplification. The manual analysis was necessitated by the fact that the same expression can convey propositional or metadiscourse meaning depending on context. This can be illustrated with the following made up examples, where the use of **example** in the first example is metadiscoursal (internal to the text) but experiential (external to the text) in the second example:

- a) A cat is an example of mammals.
- b) An example can be used to illustrate a point.

These two methods of analysis, the computer assisted search and the manual analysis for interpreting the functions of the used expressions, complemented each other. While the



software enabled the researcher to conveniently and quickly identify potential Exemplification expressions, it could only present them as concordance lines. Their interpretation depended on human judgment.

The projects were labelled by using the university's formal abbreviations as follows: FOA for Faculty of Agriculture, FED for Faculty of Education, FHS for Faculty of Health Sciences, FOH for Faculty of Humanities, FOST for Faculty of Science and Technology, and FSS for Faculty of Social Sciences. To identify the projects for each faculty, each was given a number, 1-10). Thus, project 1 from the Faculty of Agriculture was labelled as [FOA-1] for instance. This was done to protect the identity of the student writers.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### **Exemplification markers**

Frequency counts indicate that that there were 120 occurrences of exemplification. Students used five different markers for exemplification, namely, such as, for example, for instance, like and include. It is important to note that the five markers used include instances where the variants of the markers were also used. These involve the marker for example with its variants (an example is/ an example of x is/ x is an example of) and include (with its variant including). Table 1 below shows the frequency counts and examples of the use of exemplification markers by the students

Table 1: Exemplification markers used by students

Marker	Example	Frequency	Percentage
Such as		68	57%
	Usually lactic acid, acetic acid propionic acid,		
	and other volatile acids such as hexanoic acid		
	and formic acid are the acids produced.[FOST-		
	3]		
For example	They also indicated that they employ the	23	19%
	husbandry and management practices		
	necessary to protect themselves from any		
	dangers. These include, for example, giving		
	the piglets iron injection at the right time and		
	sanitation.[FOA-7]		
For instance	This also led to students taking teaching aids	22	18%
	for granted. For instance, in cycle two, on the		
	first topic, the teacher brought the ball to class,		
	with the hope that almost every learner is		
	familiar with the ball, but they were making		
	fun out of it, though they realized its		
	importance as the lesson progressed. [FED-4]		
Like	The teacher discussed problems like poor	5	4%
	expressions, spelling mistakes, tense		
	and grammar.[FED-10]		
Include	After repatriation people rarely cook the so	2	2%
	called traditional kitchen of indigenous foods,		
	which <b>include</b> among others, papasane,		
	leharasoane, tenane, because they are not		



	accessible at the new places. [FOH-2]			
Total		120	100%	

From the table above, it can be observed that the marker **such as** was the most frequent, accounting for more than half of the occurrences and followed by **for example** and **for instance**. The findings on the rankings of these exemplification markers are consistent with findings elsewhere. For instance, in Su and Zhang (2019) study of Exemplification in research articles, eight markers were identified, with **such as**, **for example** and **for instance** ranking amongst the top five and in the same order. A similar pattern in terms of the rankings was also observed in Hyland (2007) and Triki (2021).

It can also be noted that the abbreviation (**e.g**), which is quite common in professional writing (see, for example, Hyland 2007, p.278; Su and Zhang 2019, p.4; Triki 2021,p.9), was not used. This is not surprising because students are generally discouraged from using abbreviations as that is not an academic style of writing, in the opinion of some instructors of Academic Writing. In the context of this study, it could be argued that non-occurrence of the abbreviation **e.g.** could be a direct result of Communication and Study Skills [CSS] teaching at the university. The CSS package devotes a whole chapter to academic style. The aim of this chapter is to make students aware of the style that is acceptable in academic texts (CSS Package 2010/11) and students are explicitly instructed not to use abbreviations in their academic writing.

# **Semantic Patterns of Exemplification**

In any form of Exemplification, there are three compulsory discourse units, namely the exemplified unit, the exemplification marker and the exemplifying unit (Triki 2021,p.2). Briefly explained, it can be said that, since exemplification is used to aid comprehension by giving an example of the general term/concept or point the writer would have made, that part which needs further elaboration/clarification is the exemplified unit. Then, the unit that signals the act of exemplifying is referred to as the exemplification marker. Lastly, there is the exemplifying unit, or rather, the example itself, which illustrates the general term/concept or the point that the writer made. These elements are illustrated below, with examples taken from the students' texts. For ease of reference, following Triki (2021), the exemplified unit is in italics, the exemplification marker is in bold, and the exemplifying unit (example) is underlined. The following examples from students' texts illustrate:

- 1. However, there is high intake of *carbohydrates* such as papa, bread and porridge among elderly as has been shown by the study results. [FHS-3]
- 2. Women do a lot of agricultural activities while men do little. For example, women sow the seeds, do the weeding, pick off the insects and play a major role in harvesting while men do ploughing only.[FSS-6]

In the first example, the writer gives examples of some of the members of the set "carbohydrates" to specify the kind of carbohydrates most adults take (which include papa, bread and porridge). In the second example, the writer provides a situation that obtains in the society under study. This is done to substantiate the claim made, namely that it is women who do the bulk of the work. Below is a table indicating the different patterns of exemplification in the students' texts. A new element, the 'Hinge' is in square brackets. This is defined as the element that links different parts (Su and Zhang 2020:5). It serves grammatical rather than semantic purposes.

Table 2: Patterns of Exemplification

Structure of exemplification	Example
Exemplified + Exemplification Marker +	It is observed with the principal aim of
Exemplifier	providing basic preparation for adulthood by
	inculcating the young with values such as
	courage, endurance of life's hardships and the
	importance of procreation. [FOH-10]
Exemplification Marker + Exemplified +	Examples of biguanides [are] metformin and
Hinge + Exemplifier	glucophage. [FOST-2]
Exemplified + Exemplification Marker+	Food borne infections are often spread through
Hinge + Exemplifier	contaminated water, milk vegetables. An
	<b>example</b> [is] Shiqella which causes bacillary
	dysentery.[FHS-2]
Exemplifier + Hinge + Exemplification	Giving the piglets iron injection at the right
Marker+ Exemplified	time and sanitation [are] some of the husbandry
	and management practices farmers employ.
	[FOA-7]

Looking at the patterns and examples above, it can be observed that while exemplification requires the presence of the three units; Exemplified, Exemplification Marker and the Exemplifier, these do not have a fixed order. This is because the terms are based on their semantic role and their positioning is governed by grammatical rules. This also explains why another element, the Hinge, has been introduced. In addition, as has been noted earlier that **such as** and **for example** were the most frequent markers, it is not surprising that the pattern Exemplified+ Exemplification Marker+ Exemplifier was the most frequently used pattern. This finding is consistent with findings in Su and Zhang (2020) study where, out of a total of 3210 instances of exemplification, 2544 were of this pattern (although they used slightly different terminologies). It could also be concluded that the same pattern would be the most frequent in studies that examined Exemplification since the marker **such as** was the most frequent.

# **Grammatical Forms of Exemplification Elements**

As regards the grammatical forms of the Exemplified unit, it can be realised that the units exemplified were nouns, noun phrases and clauses/sentences as illustrated below.

- 3. It is observed with the principal aim of providing basic preparation for adulthood by inculcating the young with *values such as* courage, endurance of life's hardships and the importance of procreation. [FOH-10]
- 4. Apart from that, they indicate that women do a lot of agricultural activities while men do little. For example, women sow the seeds, do the weeding, pick off the insects and play a major role in harvesting while men do ploughing only.

As can be seen, the units that needed exemplifying were terms or concepts, syntactically realised as noun or noun phrases. Other units that needed exemplifying were statements or claims, syntactically realised as clauses/sentences.

When looking at the forms of the exemplifying units (or examples), the same pattern was observed, namely that the examples would be nouns, noun phrases or clauses/sentences (see the examples above, underlined). With examples involving sentences however, it should be noted that sometimes the exemplifier could be series of sentences. The example could even be a whole paragraph. In such cases, the writer would substantiate the claim made by

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giving a real situation or providing a hypothetical situation. The following examples illustrate these different types of exemplifiers at the sentence level:

- 5. More creativity in terms of teaching aids was entirely on the teacher himself, since students were rarely asked to design their own teaching aids. *This also led to students taking teaching aids for granted*. For instance, in cycle two, on the first topic, the teacher brought the ball to class, with the hope that almost every learner is familiar with the ball, but they were making fun out of it, though they realised its importance as the lesson progressed. [FED-4]
- 6. Pig meat sellers happen to be the farmers that make much more profit than in the other two systems. This is especially true for those who use cooperatives as their market since the prices are set much higher than the prices obtained by the farmers slaughtering at the abattoir and selling to butcheries. The example [can be] where there are 6 cooperative members. They would slaughter a pig of one of their members irrespective of its size or age (even though it must be in good condition). Each member would put down M300 for a 5-litre pail full of meat irrespective of its weight. If the pig was big enough, after all have got their pales, the leftover can be used for family consumption or sold to the neighbours adding to the money obtained from the members. [FOA-7]

It can be argued that where the exemplifying unit is a series of sentences, the aim was to not just to provide more space to illustrate a point but to argue. This is succinctly explained by Triki (2021:11) who points out that "they generally provide situations and scenarios that would boost a previously introduced claim by offering real contexts where those claims could be move visible, or hypothetical, where a scenario of authenticity could come into existence".

## **Inappropriate Use of Exemplification**

With regard to the question of whether Exemplification was inappropriately, it was observed that although students generally used exemplification markers appropriately, there were a few problems. These are indicated below:

The first type of error involved cases where students used reformulations instead of exemplification. This can be seen in the example below.

7. They have a number of new innovations. **That is,** they have increased the number of computers in the corporation that ensures good record-keeping. [FSS-8]

Another type of error involved cases of mismatch between the general term and the example as shown in the following example:

8. They pointed out that, what could increase agricultural production are the appropriate facilities **such as** fertilizers and other inputs. [FSS-6]

There were also cases where student writers provided examples without explicitly introducing them through the use of exemplification markers. The following example illustrates:

9 There has however, been major concern that the Lesotho Tourism Development Corporation (LTDC) does not at all involve locals. [exemplification marker necessary here] The local government officials say they were forced to halt the construction of the village because they had not been consulted for the issue of who was to be employed. [FOH-5]

To conclude, it can be observed that these errors make comprehension a bit challenging in that while the reader can recover the writer's intended meaning, it might take time to rephrase the sentences. It can therefore be concluded that in cases like these, the writers have not adequately led the reader through the text for quick and effective information recovery.



#### **CONCLUSION**

From the findings in this study, it can be concluded that NUL students generally used exemplification effectively to enhance the effectiveness of their texts. The study has therefore proven that, indeed, exemplification is a powerful rhetorical persuasive strategy writers/speakers employ to create credibility as they back up their claims with evidence in the form of examples. When these are provided to back up claims made, readers are likely to be persuaded by the information. This strategy is thus relevant in students' writing.

It has however been noted that students did not some of the exemplification markers such as **e.g** or **a case in point**. While it could be argued that they are still in the learning process, it is maintained that as fourth and final year students who have been exposed to a lot of reading and writing, they should have been aware of how professional writers presented their argument and supported them as well as how they use different markers and emulated them. A related point concerns the limited number of patterns of exemplification. It has been indicated that the students used only four patterns and yet there are many ways in which exemplification can be realised, even using those limited exemplification markers. For instance Su and Zhang (2020) identified seventeen patterns in the research articles which used eight markers (**e.g.**, such as, for example, illustrate, for instance, an example of, exemplify and an instance of).

The errors that were observed point to the need to re-emphasise the importance of explicit teaching of metadiscourse categories as an effective way to guide the reader through the text. The recommendation about explicit teaching of Exemplification is based on the evidence that explicit teaching of metadiscourse helps students to be more aware of their writing and improve it (Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen 1993, Cheng and Steffensen 1996).

This explicit teaching of metadiscourse categories will result in what Swales (1990, p.213) refers to as 'rhetorical consciousness raising'. This involves tasks that make students aware of the features than tend to recur in particular genres and academic communities. Being aware of these features will help students improve their own writing. For instance, Sengupta (1999) engaged Chinese year one students in a BA programme in reading research articles, review articles and book chapters and discussing features of texts that students perceived as reader friendly. Students also analyzed their own essays. The results of the study indicate that these exercises were an effective strategy to enable students to read with understanding. This position is reaffirmed by Hyland (2004) when he points out that "consciousness raising is crucial in L2 writing instruction and for teachers this means helping students to move beyond the conservative prescriptions of the style guides and into the rhetorical contexts of their disciplines, investigating the preferred patterns of expressions in different communities".

To conclude, it should be noted that while this study has contributed to the existing knowledge on the use of Exemplification, it has limitations. First, the study only focussed on a part of the students' complete projects. The conclusions about the students' use of limited number of exemplification markers and limited patterns should therefore be taken with caution. Further studies could examine the complete projects. Secondly, the fact that the projects are supervised and have input from the lecturers could have affected the observation on errors. It has been observed that the errors did not adversely hinder comprehension. It is not clear what the findings would have been if students brought work in which there had not been any external input. Further studies could therefore focus on students' original texts such as essays.



Despite these limitations, the results obtained from this study have pedagogical implications for the teaching of Exemplification in the university's first year course on academic communications skills and literacies. As the analysis has indicated that students use a limited set of exemplification markers, the teaching of the first year course should expose students to other markers so as to help them improve their writing by using various markers and breaking monotony. It has also been noticed that students a few patterns of exemplification. Direct teaching of the different patterns should also be employed to help students vary their sentence structures.

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