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ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS OF STUDENTS AT THE POLYTECHNIC IN POZEGA

VJEŠTINA AKADEMSKOG PISANJA STUDENATA VELEUČILIŠTA U POŽEGI

VULIC, Vesna & DEL VECHIO, Manuel

Abstract: *This paper reports on the results of an investigation into the nature of academic writing competences among first year Undergraduate Professional Students of Administrative Study at the Polytechnic in Pozega. The study examined the challenges students had to face in the process of academic writing from planning to evaluating their own writing. Document analysis and the questionnaire were used as data collecting instruments. An analysis of the students' essays revealed many weaknesses in academic writing. The paper aims to recommend interventions and techniques to improve student academic writing practises.*

Key words: *academic writing, competences, evaluate, assessment*

Sažetak: *Ovaj rad predstavlja rezultate analize vještine pisanja akademskih radova na engleskom jeziku studenata preddiplomskog stručnog Upravnog studija Veleučilišta u Požegi. Rad istražuje probleme s kojima se studenti susreću u procesu pisanja, od planiranja do vrednovanja vlastitog rada. Analiza eseja i upitnik korišteni su u svrhu prikupljanja podataka. Analiza eseja ukazala je na brojne pravopisne, gramatičke i strukturne slabosti. Rad ukazuje na potrebu dodatnog podučavanja i vježbanja vještine pisanja eseja unutar kolegija Engleski jezik.*

Ključne riječi: *pisanje akademskih radova, kompetencije, vrednovanje, ocjenjivanje*



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1. Introduction

A simple definition of academic writing is any writing done to fulfil a requirement of a college or university. A broad definition includes any writing assignment given in an academic setting. In Croatia students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are expected to write well academically at tertiary levels.

Students who wish to enroll for higher education in Croatia are required to pass State Matura which is the secondary school leaving exam. It consists of three compulsory and one optional exam. Compulsory exams (Mathematics, Croatian Language and a foreign language) can be undertaken on two levels: Higher/Extended Level (A) and Basic Level (B). The English Matura Exam A Level consists of three tests: the listening, reading and writing test. The writing test is a 75 minutes essay test at B2 level. Task example is given in Figure 1.

Write an essay of 200-250 words.
Your essay must have an introduction, body and conclusion.
Some people say that there should be limits to what students can wear at school.
Others say there should not.
Discuss both of these views and give your opinion.

Figure 1: Task example for The English Matura Exam A Level

During their secondary education students have developed certain writing skills which have to be improved in their English Language Course for specific Purposes. The teaching model of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) for students of the first year of Undergraduate Administrative Study is designed according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) [1] . It is based on the combination of a face-to-face environment and online learning within the e-learning system Merlin, which is an e-learning platform, based on an open-source system Moodle developed and administrated by the E-learning Centre. In planning the curriculum of the English language course lecturers pay attention to the language of law which is objective, incisive and certain.

Writing involves composing, developing and analysing ideas, implying the ability to rephrase information in the form of narratives, or transforming information into new texts as an argumentative writing [2]. After doing the academic writing component, students are expected to present their knowledge of a particular legal topic in the form of written assignments.

This paper gives an insight into the process of academic writing by observing critical gaps and identifying common syntactic, structural and grammatical errors made by students in writing tasks.

2. Background of the study

Twenty-nine European states signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and declared their aims of establishing a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by

the year 2010. A lot of attention has been paid to learning for the future, which meant that a deep modification of educational models was needed.

The English language curriculum has been changing throughout the years trying to cope with specific needs of learners. Among other skills academic writing is becoming a much desired skill. However, among ESP students, academic writing is considered to be difficult due to lack of specialized vocabulary and grammatical competency. In Croatia most students acquired some competences in writing essays during secondary school education as a preparation for State Matura exam in English language and academic writing at higher education level should not be too demanding task. Although many students have a general knowledge of grammar rules, not many are able to write academically at Level B and above. Therefore, improving and monitoring the development of academic writing skill levels of learners is becoming increasingly important. Effective writing has to go through a series of stages, until a final, meaningful product, is produced. Tyner [3] and Hedge [4] agree that writing should go through processes of pre-writing (such as brainstorming), drafting, revising and proofreading. In this study, the essential criteria for developing academic writing skills were examined, such as attitudes towards academic writing tasks, planning, developing paragraphs and three steps which apply to essay writing and critical self-evaluation of writing. Feedback on students' drafts was provided to help them identify areas of strengths and aspects for improvement. Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann [5] stated that providing feedback on learners' writing is a key pedagogical practice in higher education.

Our study was also interested in analysing students' essays with focus on graphical, grammatical and rhetorical skills. Many researches recommend that ESL learners must be taught to write effectively and not just correctly [6]. Therefore extensive, thorough and focused instruction of academic vocabulary accompanied by study of grammar and discourse is essential for developing ESP written proficiency in disciplines according to Hinkel [7].

3. Design of the study

3.1. Participants

At present the situation of learning a foreign language at a tertiary level in Croatia is the continuation of language teaching from secondary school. The English language instruction program at the Social Department of Polytechnic in Pozega amounts to 90 hours, distributed in the first three semesters of the studies. The language groups differ not only in size but also in ability. English Language for students of the first year of Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study is taught in the form of contact teaching (once a week for 90 minutes) with the use of a course book.

The study took place over two semesters of the 2014-2015 academic year. The participants were 51 first-year students of Undergraduate Professional Administrative Study. Their level was either lower intermediate, B1 or intermediate B2 according to

CEFR. The profile of the participants was young adult students, 32 female and 19 male. Their average was 19, 50 were 19 and 4 were 20.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected through a questionnaire and a document analysis.

During the first two semesters each student had to write four essays as first, second, third and fourth assignment. Firstly, the lecturer identified critical gaps in students writing during the evaluation of each essay draft and discussed them with each student. Two hundred and four essays written by fifty one student were analyzed. In each essay the lecturer's focus was on grammatical, graphical, rhetorical and other skills such as referencing, tenses, parts of speech and clarity.

A questionnaire was personally delivered to each of fifty one students. All of them completed and returned the questionnaire. The obtained results were analyzed, presented and discussed with students at the end of second semester.

3.3. Design of the questionnaire

The student questionnaire was administered in the last week of May 2015 at the end of second semester. The students completed the questionnaire which consisted of twelve questions in one of the English classes. The first three questions were about the length of time during which they studied English and which level of State Matura exam they took. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of statements dealing with attitudes towards academic writing, perceptions to peer work, writing one or more drafts, using various resources (law dictionaries, the Internet), planning and organizing writing, evaluating grammatical ability, editing and proofreading and evaluating their own work.

The questionnaire was based on a Likert scale aimed at determining the respondents' level of agreement to each statement in the questionnaire in order to get the feedback on their perceptions to academic writing. The Likert style form allowed students to select answers based on how much they agreed with the point of view given in the question. They could also indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the items.

4. Results obtained from the survey

4.1. Findings from questionnaire

The 51 students involved in the questionnaire survey were from 18 to 21 year old. The median age of the group was 19.2. The majority of students (72 %) were female. The first section focused on the period of time they studied English and level of the Matura Exam in English. The results of the questionnaire are reported below.

Questions and responses

RESPONSE	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12
NO. OF SUBJECTS	1	1	1	9	25	12	3	1
PERCENTAGE	2 %	2 %	2 %	17 %	47 %	22 %	6 %	2 %

Table 1: "How many years have you been studying English?"

Students have been learning English from four to twelve years. The mean score is 9.00. Seventy-seven percent of students have been learning English for more than nine years.

RESPONSE	YES	NO
NO. OF SUBJECTS	39	12
PERCENTAGE	76 %	24 %

Table 2: "Did you take higher level (A) of State Matura exam in English Language.?"

Out of the total number of 51 students 76 percent took higher level (A) of State Matura exam in English language.

Academic writing is time-consuming for you and you draft you essays with a difficulty				
SA	A	N	D	SD
6	3	26	7	9

Table 3

Thirteen percent of the participants rated the task of academic writing time consuming. While 51% of the participants could not agree or disagree with the statement, 17% of the participants clearly did not consider academic writing as time-consuming.

Cooperating with peers helps to brainstorm ideas and viewpoints for assigned topics				
SA	A	N	D	SD
10	26	8	4	3

Table 4

Majority of participants agreed that cooperation with peers helped them develop ideas better.

Lecturer's evaluation of essay draft helps in shaping the final version of an assignment better

SA	A	N	D	SD
20	21	5	3	2

Table 5

Eighty percent of participants agreed that lecturer's suggestions are valuable in shaping the final version of an assignment. A minority of 3.9 % strongly disagreed and 9.8% were unclear about the question.

During the essay draft process you read the related resources and consult the Internet

SA	A	N	D	SD
13	18	17	3	1

Table 6

Sixty one percent of the participants agreed that they read related topics and consult the Internet, while four percent disagreed and thirty three percent preferred not to agree or disagree.

You need a good law dictionary to ensure that you are using legal terminology properly

SA	A	N	D	SD
15	20	13	3	-

Table 7

Sixty eight percent of the participants agreed that they consult a good law dictionary while only 5.9 percent disagreed and 25.5 % did not agree or disagree.

You communicate your arguments clearly and your sentences are structurally correct

SA	A	N	D	SD
5	11	22	10	3

Table 8

Only 31.4% felt that they can communicate arguments clearly within the correct structure, as opposed to 43.1% who were unsure of their abilities, and 25.5% who disagreed that they were able to communicate clearly in writing.

Most of your sentences are grammatically correct				
SA	A	N	D	SD
7	9	5	6	4

Table 9

Thirty one point three percent of the participants were confident about their grammatical abilities, while 49.1% were not sure about their skills, and 19.6% disagreed that they were skillful in their grammatical abilities.

Editing and proofreading your writing helps to determine what is unnecessary				
SA	A	N	D	SD
13	11	17	5	5

Table10

Responses showed that 47.1% of the participants agreed that editing and proofreading helped to determine what is unnecessary, while 33.3% were unsure, and 19.6% disagreed with the statement.

You are able to assess your writing very well				
SA	A	N	D	SD
6	12	26	5	2

Table 11

Only 35.3% of the participants thought that they were able to assess their writing very well, while 51% were unsure, and 13.7% disagreed.

Lecturer's assessment of your essays is often similar to your own evaluation				
SA	A	N	D	SD
10	4	32	3	2

Table 12

Only 27.5% of the participants agreed that the evaluation of their work matched lecturer's evaluation, while 62.7% were not sure that the evaluation of their writing was similar to lecturer's evaluation of their writing, and 9.8% disagreed that their evaluation matched that of the lecturer.

4.2. Findings from document analysis

An analysis of the students' essays showed numerous problems in students' academic writing. The major categories of weaknesses observed in students' essays with the frequency of recurrence of each weakness are expressed in percentage. Students had

problems with spelling (18.5 %). Their essays also revealed misuse of parts of speech (16.7%). Incorrect punctuation, particularly that involving separation of ideas was noticeable (15.6%). Also, evident was lack of subject-verb agreement (12.4%). Further weaknesses were the use of wrong tenses (8.4 %), the use of wrong connectives/discourse markers (7.7%), wrong articles (7.5 %), weak paragraphing (7.1%), and pronouns misuse (6.1%).

The above percentages suggest the challenges students face in their academic writing tasks. Although 76% of participants took higher level (A) of State Matura Exam in English Language which included writing an essay it is obvious that they have not developed their writing skills well enough during their secondary education. The observed problems cannot be solved quickly. However, they are valuable piece of information not only for students but also for the lecturer who should devote more time during the course on consistent practice of academic writing.

5. Conclusion

This study has identified weaknesses in academic writing of the first year Undergraduate Professional Students of Administrative study at the Polytechnic in Pozega. Students' academic writing capacity was evaluated based on grammatical, structural and language ability. Questionnaire analysis revealed the students' perceptions towards academic writing tasks looking at attitudes towards writing tasks, process of preparing, planning, organizing and evaluating their own writing.

Students should always be conscious of the fact that writing is different from speech, so it demands precision, clarity, conciseness, organization and punctuation.[8] Furthermore, they need to conceptualize writing as process [9] which should go through stages of prewriting, drafting, redrafting, revising and proof reading/editing.[8]

Document analysis indicated critical aspects of academic writing which should be carefully considered in preparing a course: grammar, spelling, and word choice, punctuation, paragraphing and linking devices. Correct grammar and good spelling impress the reader while the use of relevant vocabulary indicates the knowledge of the topic. Correct use of paragraphs and linking devices create cohesion and coherence.

In order to improve and develop better writing skills lecturers should introduce some new techniques and approaches for their students. Targeted activities aiming at improving grammar, sentence and paragraph structures should be incorporated into curriculum. Students must be constantly monitored in their progress and differences in their prior knowledge of the language should not be neglected.

Different methods can be used to improve academic writing of students, such as giving different examples of strategies for planning, organizing, drafting and proof

reading/editing. Promoting and encouraging the ability to evaluate student's work is also very important. Lecturer's feedback on draft essay is critical for composing better content and structure of an essay.

All the findings of the study may be used for the development of curriculum that would include the teaching methodologies in English for Specific Purposes academic writing as a separate course or as a part of the regular course of the English language which is compulsory for students of Polytechnic in Pozega.

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