



The Importance of Writing

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores writing skills which seem to be the least popular and most difficult skills to acquire in a foreign language. Nevertheless, they are crucial in the development of other language and metacognitive skills. The article attempts to discuss benefits and reasons why it is important to develop writing and supports them with the findings of empirical research conducted at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, Czech Republic.

Keywords: writing skills, benefits, students, research findings.

1. Introduction

The written language has nowadays an important social and educational function and its status has a high social prestige (Urbanova and Oakland, 2002: 31). It has its specific norm, which is a structure of its kind. But it was not always like that. For a long time written language was seen to be an imperfect substitute for spoken language. This attitude is found even in de Saussure (1916). The situation changed after World War II, when linguists such as Pulgram (1951) and Berry (1958) started to research written language. In the Czech Republic, the detailed theory of written language was outlined by Vachek (1973; 1989). He devoted over 50 years of his life to research on written language.

Nevertheless, in the Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing are still neglected because writing is perceived as a linguistic skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools and achieved through the mastering of grammatical and spelling rules (cf. Cmejrkova et al., 1999). Moreover, as Rychtarova's research (2003/2004: 105) shows, for teachers at elementary and secondary schools, of the four basic communication skills the most important skill to master is speaking (94%) and listening (71%), while reading (62%) and writing (49%) are considered less important.

2. Benefits of writing

Writing is essential. It brings about a lot of advantages (cf. Chappell, 2011; or What is the importance of writing?) since it helps to:

- express one's personality;
- foster communication;
- develop thinking skills;
- make logical and persuasive arguments;
- give a person a chance to later reflect on his/her ideas and re-evaluate them;
- provide and receive feedback; and
- prepare for school and employment.

As Walsh (2010) says:

Writing is important because it's used extensively in higher education and in the workplace. If students don't know how to express themselves in writing, they won't be able to communicate well with professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else. Much of professional communication is done in writing: proposals, memos, reports, applications, preliminary interviews, e-mails, and more are part of the daily life of a college student or successful graduate.

Writing has a unique position in language teaching since its acquisition involves a practice and knowledge of other

three language skills, such as listening, reading and speaking. Moreover, it requires mastering of other skills, such as metacognitive skills. Learners need to set an objective for their writing, plan it carefully, think over its layout and logical structure, revise it In the process of writing they have to use cognitive skills; they have to analyze their sources and then synthesize them in a compact piece of writing. One of the best ways to attract students to writing is to let them write at the beginning of the learning process as freely as possible and evoke in them the feeling of creativity. Creative writing obviously can play a crucial role in the development of writing skills (cf. Janikova, 2005/6; Zajicova, 2011; or Rico, 1984).

Maley (2009), for example, emphasizes the following benefits of creative writing:

- it aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse; it requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways as they attempt to express uniquely personal meanings;
- it requires a willingness to play with the language; and
- it concentrates more on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition and musicality; it also affords scope for learners who in the usual processes of formal instruction are therefore often at a disadvantage.

There is a dramatic increase in self-confidence and self-esteem which creative writing tends to develop among learners. Learners also tend to discover things for themselves about the language... and about themselves too, thus promoting personal as well as linguistic growth. Inevitably, these gains are reflected in a corresponding growth in positive motivation.

3. Research data

At the end of the winter semester of 2012, 33 students of the Faculty of Informatics and Management at the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic, were given a short questionnaire in order to investigate some issues concerning their writing skills. The questions, they were asked, were as follows:

1. Would you prefer to take a test in a foreign language: a) in a written form or b) in an oral form?
2. What documents do you write in a foreign language most often?
3. What difficulties do you have to face when you write in a foreign language?

As far as the research sample is concerned, out of 33 respondents 20 (61%) were men and 13 (39%) were women (Fig. 1)

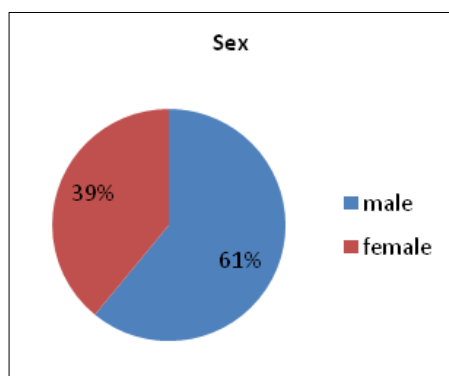


Figure 1. Respondent's sex

Students, who participated, in the survey were enrolled in the following fields of study: Management of Tourism (MT) - (19/58%), Applied Informatics (AI) - (7/21%) and Information Management (IM) - (7/21%) – see Fig.2. All of them were the first-year students. Their age ranged between 19 and 22.

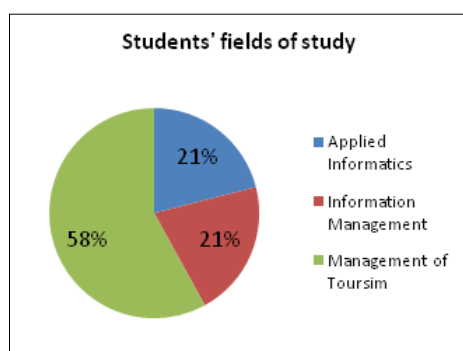


Figure 2. Students' fields of study

Ad1. This small scale research shows that students prefer the written tests (19/58%) to the oral ones (12/36%). Two students fancy both possibilities (2/6%). Compare Fig. 3.

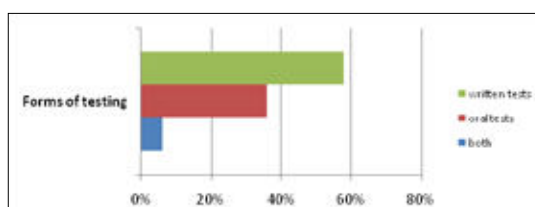


Figure 3. Forms of testing

However, the research reveals that the majority of the MT students would rather have the written exams compared to the AI and IM students (Fig. 4). This is a bit surprising since the AI and IM students who sit all the time in front of the computer screens are usually less communicative than the students of MT. On the contrary, the MT students are expected to talk to foreigners much more because they study to be managers of travel agencies or their guides in different parts of the world.

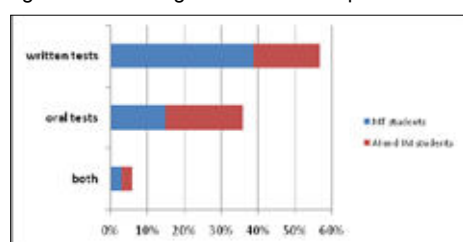


Figure 4. MT and AI/IM students and their preferences in testing – a comparison

Ad2. Out of the listed documents, students predominantly write informal e-mails (20/61%), 10/30% of them do essays/seminar papers, 5/15% students write formal e-mails and the same number of students (5/15%) does not write anything. Only 2/6% of students produce an article and 1/3% a summary. None of the students makes the report (Fig. 5).

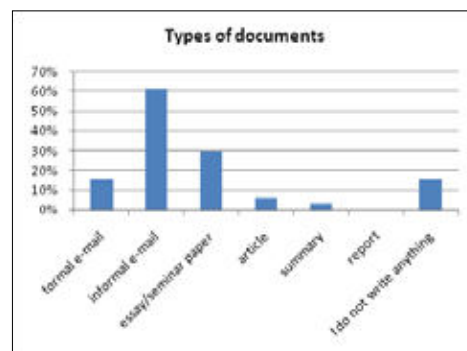


Figure 5. Types of the documents students write most often

Ad3. Students were offered a list of the common issues which might make their writing in a foreign language difficult:

1. a choice of relevant topic;
2. expressing one's thought in a foreign language;
3. logical structuring of ideas in a foreign language;
4. limited knowledge of vocabulary in a foreign language;
5. incorrect transfer of rules from the native language, e.g. about the word order, into the foreign language;
6. limited knowledge of grammar in the target language: a) word order; b) use of articles in English; c) use of tenses;
7. punctuation;
8. spelling;
9. use of formal language; and
10. writing bibliographies and references in a foreign language.

The questionnaire suggests that the most problematic area of writing for most respondents (16/49%) seems to be the use of formal language. The second area of difficulties concerns the incorrect transfer of rules from the native language into the foreign language and the correct punctuation (11/33% respondents). 10 (30%) students mention the limited knowledge of grammar, which is followed by the limited knowledge of vocabulary and writing bibliographies and references in a foreign language (8/24% respondents). 7 (21%) students have difficulties expressing one's thought in a foreign language and 6 (18%) with logical structuring of ideas in a foreign language. Finally, 4 (12%) respondents face problems with the choice of relevant topic and 3(9%) respondents with spelling (Fig. 6).

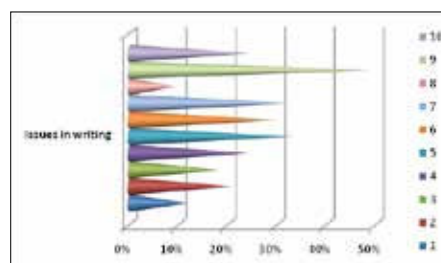


Figure 6. Students's difficulties in writing

4. Discussion of the findings

The research findings show that most students (58%) would favour the written testing in a foreign language. They provide explanations for their choice, which are as follows:

- more time for structuring ideas;
- more time for thinking and reflecting on ideas;
- peace for thinking about arguments and relevant answers;

- being less nervous in comparison with oral testing;
- being able to come back to the text after a while;
- no need to react instantly;
- no problems with pronunciation and thus easier understanding; and
- having a poor command of speaking.

Nevertheless, as the survey indicates, students do not have enough practice with formal writing since a great majority of them (61%) writes only informal e-mails and only 30% do essays, not mentioning 15% of students who do not write any document in a foreign language. In addition, they themselves (49%) confess that they have difficulties using the formal language, which is undoubtedly connected with other phenomena, such as limited knowledge of grammar (e.g. articles, word order and tenses); the phenomena that are different from the native language, in this case Czech, because the Czech language system has no articles, follows the flexible word order and uses perfective and imperfective aspects while the English language system has the articles, the fixed word order and tenses to express the verb aspect. The use of formal foreign language is also connected with the proper punctuation,

which makes students problems. Furthermore, the formal language requires the use of relevant register and corresponding vocabulary that students lack. In order to adequately describe rigorous research, students must also know how to make references. Although the logical structuring comes almost the last on the list, for a native speaker this skill is quite essential because to make the text coherent requires good thinking and thus making the whole text logical (cf. Chamonikalosova and Staskova, 2005: 58).

5. Conclusion

The findings confirm that students are interested in second language writing. However, they lack practice and experience in formal writing. Therefore, teachers during their classes should pay more attention to the development of formal writing skills. Obviously, it means much more burden for teachers afterwards since they have to provide their students with proper feedback on their writings. This is particularly true for higher education where students should conduct research, do essays, seminars papers or professional articles. And as it has been stated at the beginning, writing is important to succeed in one's career.

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