

Academic Writing Concerns Throughout University Studies - An Empirical Research



Linguistics

Keywords: academic writing, writing concerns, difficulties, ranking of concerns.

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Abstract

The topic of this article is the importance of academic writing in high education levels. Various issues and demands of academic writing as a way and manner of communication have been treated in general along with the problems students have while dealing with it and their consequences. This part, of course, is followed by an empirical study of the students' problems and difficulties, which includes a questionnaire with 25 questions which that refer to the students' experiences with academic writing. Based on the answers that were given, specific issues have been highlighted and ranked, and as a result conclusions have been made.

1. The role of academic writing

Writing is a tool of communication especially among the university community, perhaps, its most important way of communication. Throughout their university studies, students always encounter difficulties concerning the way how to write and process a text. Writing concerns are a general phenomenon, evident among students of all departments. From terminological perspective, it seems reasonable to distinguish between academic writing and scientific writing.⁷ During their studies, students do not write (scientifically) but practise academic writing, oriented by the norms of scientific text development. In fact, recently, the particular conditions of this type of text development have started to be studied, which, substantially, is a text reproduction.⁸ At the end of studies, throughout master degree courses and especially after Master thesis writing, the level of a scientific text production should be reached.

2. Academic writing requirements

Academic writing requires the realization of four types of competencies⁹. First of all, it is linguistic competence. Students usually encounter difficulties regarding the usage of linguistic norms of writing (spelling, punctuation, word order, structure of the sentence is more important, the students write Albanian with English words). This is acknowledged by those teachers who correct students' course papers. The second competence is related to style of writing: scientific texts present specific features of style (mention some features here, the tense, the voice, impersonal ...)(3) Rhetorical competence implies systematic arrangement and logical reasoning of the developed text. (4) Lastly, it should be stressed the competence of reading and perception; scientific text do not serve entertainment or inspiration but require a critical perception.

⁷ Ehlich/ Steets, 2003, p. 23.

⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁹ Kristo/Stafa, 2001, p.50

Availability, logical arrangement, reasoning and accuracy of texts make up the main requirements of academic writing.

3. Writing concerns

Writing is a general process where other processes are involved, so, it is being described as a very complex activity. Students frequently do not receive information about practical requirements of writing from their courses. They are not prepared for this activity. (This should have been done through all school system, since the very first grade) The concerns are not identified and not presented to them. Problems that are presented over the process of writing are related to the logical way of thinking and the structured reasoning, such skills that must have been acquired by students throughout their school education. The complexity of these problems turn the academic writing into a de-motivating process for most students, and make it the most difficult skill to be achieved.

In particular some of these concerns are: the beginning of the writing process, finding and defining a useful and appropriate topic and bringing personal results concerning the topic discussed. (finding a problem to be solved) A wide range of difficulties have to do with the perception of scientific literature in relation to the topic (especially the difficulties in understanding the terminology). The problems of motivation about a certain topic, the inability to develop an overall idea about the text having to be written and problems of formulation, etc. are some of the concerns that strongly need the attention of the university teachers.

One of the evident concerns after the beginning of formulation phase is the review of what has already been written. The writing process often flounders; fragments of formulation disappear of memory, and the formulation process should start again). Therefore, the formulation becomes an effort and student-writers feel like they write very slowly, so the distrust in their personal skill in writing increases. The fear of expressing themselves inappropriately also might affect this behavior.

In general, students say that they have difficulties in developing a coherent text, which means presenting argumentatively the content of a text. These difficulties derive from various reasons, which are related to the insufficient understanding of the concept and formulation difficulties, but also the deficiency in knowing scientific norms and text models may lead to problems of coherence.

At last but not at least, emotive factors play a considerable role in successful writing. Particularly, when writing academic research (course papers) the key point of success is the positive attitude towards the topic. On the contrary, numerous problems in writing may lead to lack of motivation and emotional relation to the topic.

4. The consequences of writing concerns

The consequences arising from writing concerns are ranked into three areas. At first, there are noticed negative impacts on results development: writing concerns badly affect cognitive and intellectual development of the student. Writing is not a simple activity so that you just write what you have thought in advance. Writing consists of a decisive function. Individuals who have experience in writing use writing process to formulate and draw up tasks, to develop writing intentions and to achieve a deep understanding of the content of the written assignment.

Another negative impact is related to students' behaviour towards their study. Having problems in writing, students postpone their course papers until the last minute. This usually leads them to get into panic.

However, even university as an institution is affected by these problems. Ehlich (2000, 3) states: "If the ability to write institutionally appropriate is not self-understood, then university as an institution is in crises".

5. An empirical research of concerns during writing process

Regarding the numerous concerns related to academic writing, a questionnaire was designed with 25 questions, which refer to students' experiences concerning academic writing. There were asked 283 students in total, including 'The Faculty of Human Sciences' and 'The Faculty of Education Sciences'(Master Degree Students) in 'Aleksander Xhuvani' University in Elbasan, Albania.

Table no.1 presents the number of students in respective branches divided according to gender:

Faculty	No. of students	Females	Males
FHS	175 (61.8%)	98 (56%)	77 (44%)
FES	108 (38.2%)	90 (83.3%)	18 (16.6%)
In total	283 (100%)	188 (66.4%)	95 (33.5%)

FHS=Faculty of Human Sciences; FSS=Faculty of Social Sciences

Students' age range from 19 to 24. The years of study range from first year to fifth year. The results of first question "Do you have difficulties in writing a course paper?" are presented in table no.2:

Faculty	No	Yes
FHS	23.5%	76.5%
FSES	10.0%	90%
In total	18.7% (53)	81.3% (230)

As the table shows the majority of students do have problems in academic writing in both Faculties. Faculty of Human Sciences as well as in Faculty of Social Sciences.

5.1. Special/particular problems

In the following section, the results regarding the questions of the survey/questionnaire. Only the students who have difficulties in academic writing have been taken into consideration. There have not been received answers for every question made in the survey. The number of students who have given answers to detailed questions is marked with the letter "N".

The formulation of the course paper has been interrupted by 21.9 %; 78.1 % of students have not had this experience. (N=192)

51 % of students have been disappointed by the results of their attempts; 49% have been satisfied with their results (N=198). This disappointment has certainly affected motivation for each student.

43.1% have had problems in not submitting the course paper on time, 56.9% have not encountered this problem.

51.3% felt the lack of help in designing the course paper, 48.7% felt that they have had professional assistance or consultation from teachers. (N=199)

The question "I am in front of the blank paper or computer screen and do not know how to start" was answered by 45.8% with yes, whereas 54.2% did not have such a difficulty. (N=203)

The opposite situation "I start to write beforehand and then I have to rearrange all the material" was experienced by 14.2%; 85.8% did not recognise this problem.

The question whether students draw up an initial division of the study and review it again has received a positive answer by 38.7%; 61.3% do not have this problem.

In our questionnaire, we were interested in students' self-confidence in writing a course paper since emotive factors distinctly affect the writing process. 63.3% of students felt they feared requirements and did not believe would fulfil them on time. 36.7% felt they were self-confident to meet the requirements. Why?

The conception and composition phase of a course paper is closely connected with the stage of material or literature collection needed for developing a certain topic. 58.9% felt they collected more material than they should and had difficulties in properly selecting and arranging the literature found. 41.1% did not have such a problem. (N=204)

The question whether it was difficult to find sufficient literature and material has received a positive answer by 22.9%, where as 77.1% did not have such a problem. (N=201)

A crucial feature of scientific or academic writing is intertextuality. The ability to collect and process various texts necessary for the topic discussed plays a very important and essential role for the realization of intertextuality throughout an academic study. If this is not achieved the writing

process is spoiled. The question whether students have difficulties in collecting scientific texts received a positive answer by 43.8% and 'no' answer was given by 56.2%. (N=198)

43.4% of students surveyed had difficulties in classifying and evaluating the results of existing literature concerning a certain topic. 56.6% did not confront this problem. (N=193)

The question below is related to the amount or volume of a course paper. 19.7% felt they could not write so long to meet the pages required. 80.3% did not have this problem (N=198). Meanwhile 27.8% of students mentioned they write more than necessary. 72.2% did not have such a problem. There should be some comments on this. Students cannot write precisely and concisely on the topic.

Another important concern related to academic writing is the content of the written text. The content is not directly related to writing process but also to specific knowledge of each certain field. However, no one is able to write if the content has problems. Therefore, another question of the survey referred to the difficulties students encounter in understanding the scientific content. 35.7% felt they had difficulties in understanding scientific literature. 64.3% denied such a difficulty.

In addition to other elements of academic writing, student must possess scientific style of writing. 49.5% felt they had problems with style of writing. 50.5% felt they possessed this ability.

5.2. Ranking of concerns

The aim of this empirical research, besides other objectives, is the ranking of concerns, which students encounter concerning academic writing. The percentage is given in brackets:

1. Distrust and fear to meet the necessary requirements concerning the writing process (63.3)
2. Too much material, difficulties in arranging it. (58.9)
3. Concern in starting/beginning the study (54.2)
4. The lack of professional assistance (51.3)
5. Disappointment from results (51.0)
6. Concerns related to style of writing (49.5)
7. Concerns related to processing of scientific literature (43.8)
8. Concerns related to ranking and evaluating the scientific literature (43.4)
9. Not submitting the paper on time (43.1)
10. Concerns on the structure of the study/course paper (38.7)
11. Concerns on content (35.7)

12. The paper is longer than necessary (28.7)
13. The lack of material/literature (22.9)
14. The paper is shorter than necessary (19.7)
15. Starting beforehand the study (15.7)

5.3. Other concerns

A considerable number of students surveyed mentioned other concerns, which were not the target of our questionnaire. Most of them are: concerns related to the structure of a scientific study, concerns related to the lack of motivation to write, as well as concerns related to the lack of professional consultation from teachers or students having experience in academic writing. These data are to be considered seriously and that is why we present them in this study. They require further study and analysis.

6. Conclusions

As it was seen in above-mentioned issues, we noticed that 80% of students surveyed do have difficulties or problems in academic writing. It was not noticed differences between two genders concerning academic writing.

To sum up, concerns referring to difficulties related to structure of scientific study, finding and processing material and literature, content and scientific style of study and specific consultation of students are the most problematic issues encountered by the students.

We think It is recommended that academic institutions must work harder in relation to students' consultation in the field of academic writing. It is suggested that besides the course Academic Writing and Research in Education, to set up a special consultation centre for the transmission of basic competencies in academic and scientific writing, issues widely discussed in this study.

References

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