UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE FROM A UNIVERSITY IN ESTONIA

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Abstract
This article gives an overview of a study conducted at the University of Tartu aiming to chart the prevalence of and types of academic written assignments from the perspective from teachers and students. Charting academic writing was considered the first step to better understand writing needs and opportunities in order to find support to develop an academic writing centre and find support to introduce academic writing groups as a means to promote the social process of writing. Both writing centres and academic writing groups are becoming more common placed at universities throughout the European continent.

Keywords: Academic Writing, writing centre, writing groups.

1 INTRODUCTION
Writing has an important role in all levels of education. The Estonian higher education system has increased the role of various written works soon after the restoration of independence when they started to follow the guidelines set forth by the Common European Framework. Within the curricula of higher education, academic writing skills are considered a given rather than a skill that would need to be taught or additionally supported (see for example,[1]). The shift from European education being elite oriented to mass oriented, international, and represented by many different languages and in combination with the introduction of the Bologna process has placed enormous strain on academic writing [2]–[4]. As current writing practice in a broader European Higher Educational (HE) context shows, students entering the first year are often unprepared for academic writing requirements set by universities [4], [5], with the exception of France [6] and Germany [7]. This is stark contrast to the US [8], where the teaching of writing has developed to form specific traditions, such as those represented by the process approach of writing [9]; the Writing-in-the-Discipline tradition (WID) [8]; as Kruse [4] also points out, the Academic Literacies Approach (ACLIT); the academic writing genre approach embedded in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) [10]–[12]; and academic discourse [13]. Within the broader European context, if a specific writing tradition was adopted, it was the latter two; primarily because educational reform, or institutions did not have any direct stake in teaching writing, and this approach can easily fill the gap for specific writing needs of primarily English writing tasks, such as the thesis, or the academic journal article. The stakeholders of writing were enthusiasts, usually English language teachers who either approach writing with the notion of learning English, or teach writing with the notion of applying specific linguistic features to those specific writing tasks. As a result, within this context, writing is mainly taught at postgraduate levels [4]. This is true also in the context of Central and Eastern Europe and countries of the former Soviet Republic [14].

1.1 Background
In higher education, written texts are generally used to assess knowledge. However, writing itself plays an increasingly important role beyond higher education. More importantly, different disciplines and specializations require different types of writing skills. Specifically within the context of this paper, developing the skills of writing, concealed in academic writing courses, mainly focuses on lower-order writing skills development (correct punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling.) The course itself, however, does not include the most important skill to be learned: writing.

This aspect is not unique and many universities who currently have strong writing programs (such as the United States and UK) have gone through similar transition. According to Mitchell ([15][135], this transition can be referred to as "making the invisible visible". Evidence of such transitions are supported by writing programs such the writing across the curriculum (WAC) [16] and writing in the
discipline (WID) [17] movement focusing on developing the skills of writing outside of the discipline of composition literature and other language (English) courses. These programs had a profound effect on teaching writing in colleges and universities in the United States and in Britain in secondary education. The WAC and WID movement ultimately lead to the development of writing centres [18]. Such centres are currently common placed in many colleges and universities in the US and UK. In continental Europe, Eastern and Central Europe more specifically, such centres were virtually non-existent. The universities that did have a writing centre were universities that prominently used the English language as language for teaching and instruction, such as the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary and the American University in Paris, or universities that specifically support a single writing language such as France and Germany where writing is supported in French and German respectively. Most universities in Europe, however, support either the national language or are transitioning into using two languages (English and the national language). This duality is mainly due to the rapid expansion of internationalization and the Bologna Process. Newly established writing centres within this context were required to support two language and two writing traditions rather than a single. This has, perhaps, been the most challenging and has as a result not caused such a massive movement as was seen with the WAC and WID programs.

Writing centres in Estonian higher education institutions are not widespread. The University of Tartu, founded the Centre for Academic Writing and Communication in 2011 with as main purpose to offer peer consultations on written works of authors. In addition, the centre aims to support English and Estonian writing languages and traditions. Currently, no initiatives have been made at universities in Tallinn (Tallinn Technical University and Tallinn University) or at the University of Life Sciences in Tartu to set up a similar centre.

To our knowledge, no studies about academic writing in Estonian higher education institutes, or secondary education, has been conducted. As indicated earlier, writing in not taught or used as a means to construct and assess knowledge in high school or higher education during the period of the Soviet Union [14]. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many educational establishments began to take an example from the west (including the University of Tartu in Estonia).

In this article, we present an overview of the types of written work at the University of Tartu in order to map the needs and the possibilities to develop and support writing structurally through a writing centre. We aim to investigate what types of written works are used in various fields and levels of education and how students evaluate these works. We aim to map problems students and teachers face and how they solve these problems. We wish to elucidate to what degree the University of Tartu has made the “invisible visible” [15] and how an academic writing centre should approach the teaching of writing in both Estonian and English.

2 METHODS

In order to investigate writing, we developed a large-scale survey to be distributed electronically amongst staff and teachers and in English and Estonian across the various faculties and departments across the university.

The survey was distributed in autumn 2009 with the following objectives:

- To investigate what types of written works students are required to write in the University of Tartu
- Investigate the importance of writing
- Examine how students and teachers assess writing skills
- Determine what students do when they need support when they encounter writing problems

This article explores these questions both from the perspective of teachers and students. The analysis will focus on the most striking aspects from the answers of the students or, when there is a discrepancy between perspectives, of teachers and students. The questionnaire was piloted with 16 students and 4 teachers and minor corrections were made to the questionnaire before distribution. The survey was conducted electronically in the online survey environment eFormular in December 2009. An e-mail invitation was sent through the study information system of the University of Tartu. The invitation was extended to all third year Bachelor’s degree students, first and second year Master’s degree students, doctoral degree students, and all teaching staff. Respondents responded to the questionnaire online and took roughly 20 minutes to complete.
The questionnaire had three parts. The first part contained general questions such as age, curriculum, degree, etc. and were all closed questions. The second part contained questions about the writing assignments students receive and teachers give (types of written works, frequency, length, etc.) and contained one open-ended question (expanding information). The third part of the questionnaire asked respondents to highlight any problems they have and support they receive concerning their writing assignments (problems encountered, how do they solve problems, who provides them help, where do they go, what do they do, etc.) and contained one open-ended question (expanding information).

3 RESULTS

3.1 Sample

198 lecturers participated in the survey. The data collected from this survey was used to support, highlight, or cross-reference the results from the students' survey.

1015 students responded to the survey call. 31% of the respondents were 3rd year bachelor's students, 51% first and second year master's students, and 18% doctoral students. We assume that different levels of education distinguish different types of writing. If differences were found between the levels, these were reported in the findings.

At the time of the survey, the University of Tartu had four distinct study areas: humanities, medical sciences, real and natural sciences, and social sciences. Currently these have been renamed to be the Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty Natural Sciences, and the Faculty of Social Sciences. 25% of the respondents were in the humanities, 6% in medical sciences, 22% in real and natural sciences, and 39% in the social sciences. The majority of the respondents in the real and natural sciences and the medical sciences were mainly doctoral student. This number was far more frequent than in the humanities and social sciences. Within these two areas of study, significantly fewer bachelors' students responded to the survey.

The median age of the students participating in the survey was 28 years, with a standard deviation of 8. 76% of the respondents were female, which is a good representation. 70% of the enrolled students at the University of Tartu are female. We did not take into account gender differences in this study, as it is not relevant to the questions we raised. 90% of the respondents were Estonian natives and 10% of other nationalities. The vast majority of the respondents (94%) studied in the Estonian language and 6% follow a curriculum that was predominantly conducted in English.

3.2 Types of written work

In this section, we provide an overview of the different type of written work students were engaged in at the university. The written work has been categorised in the following: written examination, essays, literature review, précis, text summaries, and theses. Respondents were required to select any of the text types they have written throughout their studies. The results show that all students have been exposed to at least one type of written work. It should be taken into account that there is no data about how students scored for written work. The results for all levels of study are presented together with the Fig 1.
Slightly less than half of the respondents have encountered summary writing (46%) and literature review writing (41%). These two are considered important for writing academically correct text that includes synthesizing the works of others. It can be assumed that a limited experience of the latter could lead to writing problems related to plagiarism.

Fig 2 shows that the written work of undergraduate and graduate students are largely the same, but in the doctoral program, the prevalence of other works decreases. Bachelor and master's written works mainly consist of exams, essays, and literature reviews. These results help to chart the written works at various levels of education and the university as a whole. More specifically, charting these differences, will also aid in the preparation for training consultants how to support the different types of writing in the different disciplines. Additionally, a better understanding of these differences needs to be constructed through additional research.

3.3 Importance of writing

Fig 3 shows that as much as 58% of the respondents believe that written communication skills are very important and 20% consider it important. This is predictable, given the prevalence of written works throughout the university. These results are consistent with the views expressed at the beginning of the article about the importance of writing skills in higher education today [2], [4].

3.4 Assessment of writing skills

As there is an overwhelming majority of students who consider writing to be important, the question arises how students assess their writing skills. The survey asked to assess their proficiency of their
writing skills on 5-point Likert scale (weak to very good). To further highlight the results of this question, it is interesting to compare the answers of the student survey with that of the teacher survey. Teachers were asked the same question on the same scale about the writing proficiency of their students. The results are presented in Fig 4.

![Fig 4: Students assessment of writing skills and teacher assessment of student writing skills](image)

Fig 4 shows that the assessment of the written skills by students and by teachers does not coincide. The vast majority of students evaluate their writing skills high - respondents consider their skills to be good (52%) or very good (12%). However, the majority the teaching staff assesses the writing skills of student as satisfactory (51%) or weak (29%). The difference between the faculty and students opinions are also evident in the averages - students rated their writing skills with a grade average of 3.7 (out of 5), while teaching staff estimated the writing skills of students with a grade average of 2.8 (out of 5). It is also worth noting that no single faculty (of the 198 respondents) considered the writing skills of their students to be very good.

The gap between students and teacher opinions can be explained in several ways. First students might overestimate their abilities and teacher might underestimate student's abilities. The latter may derive from the common negative preconception teachers have about students as writers. This may, in turn, be the result of the implementation of the Bologna process where higher education is open to the masses (i.e. also mature students). Within the context of Estonia, where, specifically the older generation of students had very little preparation for academic writing, their lacking ability might contribute to the formation of a negative attitude towards the writing skills. In addition, the gap between knowing how to write and the current standards set forth by programs causes a discrepancy between written products and standard requirements.

Poor qualities of writing skills (feeding to the negative assessment) might also be related to secondary education. We may assume that the university is not engaged to teach students the skills or writing or the requirements set forth by the writing assignments, because they assume that secondary schools should prepare students for this purpose. However, as Ehala et al. [19] noted, students have little contact with written texts, and therefore have poor literacy skills.

Another reason why there is a gap between teacher and student perceptions is that students often evaluate the product itself (i.e. the grade attached) and not the quality of the writing. Thus, if the result is good (i.e. I know the content) the writing must therefore be good. In this context, it is likely that it is not clear what writing actually means. Again, the product itself, or the quality of the text, can be evaluated through the correct use of language, grammar, style, and vocabulary (i.e. lower-order concerns). As many courses provided at the university focus on these topics and are considered writing skills, when a student masters these skills, the writing is considered good or even very good. Teachers, however, regard the quality of the writing itself, the higher-order concerns (e.g. logic, arguments, paragraphing, etc.) to be more important and therefore evaluate the writing skills of students to be poorer. These findings highlight the need to identify what is considered good writing skills and how these skills are developed and demonstrated in writing itself.
3.5 Problem Solving

As written work is considered important, we examined how students solve problems when they encounter a problem with their writing. In the survey, students had to respond with yes or no to five proposed solutions (ask the teacher for help, do the best I can do, consult web resources, look for sources elsewhere (e.g. library, friends, etc.), find a course). The results are illustrated in Fig 5.

Figure 5: When encountering problems with writing, what do I do?

Fig 5 shows that bachelor and master's degree students are most frequently (80% and 74%) looking for solutions on the web. Asking for help from a teacher is confirmed only by half of the students (45% and 53%). Courses do not seem to be very popular amongst bachelor and master’s students (11%). Doctoral students differ when seeking help. About half of the respondents affirm making use of all measures. 29% of the doctoral students confirm that they search for relevant courses when they encounter problems with their writing. A reason why this might be as writing courses to teach doctoral students writing have been included in the curriculum as elective courses, and as doctoral students need to collect credit points for their doctoral studies, registering to a course is considered an good option. Additional information, provided by an open-ended question if other solutions were found, revealed that many doctoral students seek the assistance from their course mates. A detailed analysis of this data is not available, but it does reveal that searching for writing solutions, at the doctoral level, creates spontaneous unorganised social networks, something we will highlight in the discussion section.

In some respects, it is understood that at bachelor and master’s level, following courses is not the main solution. The curriculum is constructed in such a way that when a problem arises (within a semester) the solution (a course) is only available next semester (when courses are open for registration). Immediate solutions (or courses/workshops) are not at hand when the problem arises. Specifically for these students, immediate help is needed and should be provided, specifically when students are working on their final thesis. For doctoral students writing texts in somewhat integrated in their research activities and therefore writing has a more prominent role. Thus, seeking solutions are much more important and long-term and therefore courses and self-education are highly conscious activities.

Amongst the teachers' results, the survey revealed that the majority of the teaching staff is ready to help students with writing distress. 43% of the teachers always help struggling students, 36% usually, and 20% sometimes. Fig 6 illustrates how teachers help their students. Answers to the survey were categorized as following: correct language mistakes, personal one-on-one advice, provide information about courses (if any), redirecting to web sources, and redirect to other materials.
Fig 6 shows that 80% of the teachers help struggling students with their writing and they do so by correcting language mistakes. Less common do they provide help through personal consultation and by directing them to other materials (41% and 45%). Rarely do teachers direct students to web resources or courses (23% and 25%). This might be as teachers do not have relevant information about courses on offer or their program does not have any courses on offer. The high prevalence of language error correction is likely that error corrections are easy to make - grammar is a clear and tangible criterion linked improving a text. Unfortunately, these improvements are superficial and do not help to improve the deeper problems related to writing itself and therefore these corrections will not help to improve student’s writing skills. The introduction of such corrections is generally considered a feature of novice writers ([20]: 25). It can be assumed that an apparent lack of time causes these solutions to take place. It is not conceivable that teachers are able to help or teach all students how to write. First, it is not their responsibility and secondly, they are more interested in the content of their subject, rather than the skill of writing.

4 DISCUSSION

The authors of this paper regard writing to be a foremost a social process. This process includes both the writer and the reader as owners of the text and thereby both should always be considered. Good academic writing is demanding and within higher education is discipline specific. In addition, correct academic writing heavily relies on the function of the text itself. We believe that academic writing skills, within the context of the university of Tartu, can be supported by introducing a systematic approach to teaching writing. This can be extended to lower levels of education as well. One way to improve writing is to use the social nature of writing. Utilizing commenting and feedback (teacher and peer) throughout the writing process. This approach is not new and it has been practiced for perhaps as long as academic texts were written in the world of science. Writing groups, as suggested by Peter Elbow, formulated in the 1960s and supported by the student-centered learning principles of John Dewey [21]–[24]. Writing groups have been known to work at universities and the University of Tartu has practiced this form of work for nearly two years and has had positive feedback from participants.

Another (not alternative, but complementary to the previous solution) is to revisit and rethinking how writing courses should be organized and what should be taught in these courses. As already mentioned, there are many European and former Soviet Union countries who guise academic writing skills as grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary teaching. These courses need to be reconsidered to focus for the most part on the writing process itself.

The professors of the University of Tartu who responded to the survey perhaps revealed why writing is not supported or taught: the number of students enrolled in classes is high and giving feedback to such an amount of students is often not possible. We believe that this problem can be solved by putting students in writing groups where they all have the opportunity to discuss their text with others. This was also highlighted by the spontaneous solution doctoral students found when they struggled with their writing. It is also quite likely that teachers are not competent to teach writing, as in Estonia (as probably in many more countries of the former Soviet Union Independent States), there is no such
tradition. Language teachers also bring out that they feel unequipped to comment on the content, and therefore focus on the aspect they do know: language [4].

The authors of this paper also believe that teaching writing should begin in the first year. More exposure to different types of text will help students to develop these skills throughout their study. If writing becomes predominant at the Doctoral degree level (as is often the case in natural and medical sciences), learning how to write comes too late. We believe that a higher proficiency of academic writing as a social process consists of at least three key components: professional knowledge, which grows out of the theme, language skills (what the student should be trained at lower levels of education, from primary school and secondary school), and writing skills. To this end, we need appropriate training of teachers and the practice of writing groups implemented. Finally, to promote and support all these activities, a centre for academic writing (writing centre) will help to streamline these aspects across the curriculum. So we start the process of teaching writing as a social process and support it the best possible way.

REFERENCES


