UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ WRITING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show the assessment of writing skills in university students. The aim group were students of English philology 1st grade (2nd year of full-time and part-time), the research focusing on four major content areas: 1) sentence making/syntax, 2) level of accuracy, 3) tenses/grammar and 4) handwriting. The study research was applied to check how students deal with writing skills after one year of online learning caused by the pandemic of COVID-19.

Keywords: writing skills, assessment, effective communicative skills.

Introduction

As it is widely known, teaching practical skills is a tough work. The way we are teaching and transmitting the knowledge into our students shape their accuracy in English while being students and later on in their professional lives. That is why, academic teachers treat practical skills seriously to achieve the students’ academic success.

Even native speakers of a language sometimes have difficulties in showing a good command of writing. Last year, there appeared an article about the accuracy of writing skills among British students. It showed that there is an extremely serious problem because students have a problem to communicate in writing. What is more, because of the policies that allow universities to avoid marking mistakes...
in their students` work, everybody seems not to notice that students` written forms are full of poor spelling, punctuation and grammar mistakes:

Universities and colleges are failing to mark down students for poor spelling, grammar and punctuation, which is leading to grade inflation because of a misguided application of equalities legislation, according to England’s higher education regulator.¹

What is more, Michelle Donelan, the universities minister for England, said: “The government is determined to drive up standards at universities so that every student can benefit from a quality education which leads to good outcomes, and it is right that the Office for Students is putting universities that disregard poor written English on notice.”²

They noticed that the situation in the United Kingdom is serious and if they do not take any action their students will not have the ability to communicate in writing properly. They review says:

Universities UK, which represents more than 140 mainstream higher education institutions, said: “Universities fully recognise the importance of English language proficiency and effective communication skills. Their courses and assessments are designed to assess a wide range of skills and knowledge.”³

This research showed that there has appeared a problem with students` skills in academic writing among British students, it is puzzling if there is the same problem in other developed countries.

**Learning writing skills**

Language is a way of communication between people. According to Carney “language is a set of a few specified vocal symbols that help the human beings to communicate with others”.⁴

It can be said that language development in children is facilitated by sound symbolism. Studies show that infants with low level of words in the vocabulary learn new ones by detecting sound symbolism in unknown words and process them as if they were real words. Then, in older children with higher number of words in vocabulary sound symbolism helps them to establish word-referent associations and to extract the words meaning invariance from information they observe when hearing a word.

To use the language properly, to convey our thoughts, wishes, intentions, feelings and information in a written form (Pamela 1991), people need to achieve

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
accuracy in four main skills (receptive and productive skills) such as reading, listening and writing, speaking. Reading and listening are receptive skills whereas speaking and writing productive skills. Children start communicating in a written form at a school level as they start to interact with each other. Writing is one of the basic skills in learning a foreign language and some say the most difficult one. To write properly, well-structured presentation of thoughts in an organized and planned way is required. Advanced writing skill is one of the basic requirements for better academic performance as well as other activities related to writing presentation (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002).

To bequeath the information in a written form there must be the organization of information within a clause and the choice of grammatical construction. Then, there is sentencing with rhetorically oriented decisions which determine how the writer combines clauses into sentential units. It should be first explained what the sentence is. Is it like the blocks of the writer’s thoughts put into paragraphs? Surely, it is an orthographical piece of writing with a capital letter at the beginning and a full stop at the end. Moreover, equally important definition of a sentence is that it is “a text comprising one or more units of information which together constitute a specific and relatively independent step in fulfilling your communicative aim at the level of the paragraph”\(^5\). To sum up, those two definitions give us the information about the form of the sentence (the orthographical definition) as well as the communicative intentions of the writer (the rhetorical definition). A sentence can be different in form i.e. there can be a simple sentence with a finite verb or a complex one consisting of two or more combined clauses or just a sentence fragment like a non-clausal sentence, however it appears rarely in academic English. Apart from the indicators mentioned above to create a written work, worth mentioning is the relationship between the writer and the reader. Usually they do not known each other, however the writer cannot achieve success in communication by using the personality of the reader but must rely on the coherence of his work. It is advisable to avoid using exclamations because they bring too much emotion into the text. It is better to use lexical means to express what the writer would like to write. One more thing which should be taken into consideration is the length of the sentence. Long sentences are rarely used in academic English, because the writer can focus too much on the lexical and grammatical correctness as a result producing simple, short sentences of equal length.

Moreover, the key to produce successful piece of writing is to pack the information appropriately with the use of clauses as the basic building blocks. There is a limited number of them however, there is their variation how they can be filled to transmit the information to the reader. There are two issues that the writer should consider:

\(^{5}\) Ibid.
How should you formulate the central message so that the information presented follows most naturally from the previous context and prepares the reader best for what is still to come?

And

How should you formulate each message so that the reader immediately identifies the most important element in the message?\(^6\)

The first one talks about the available syntactic choices whereas the second one about the most important element of the message which the writer would like to signal.

Moreover, according to Henry, there are micro-skills that must be fulfilled to achieve success in writing:

1. use the script, spellings and punctuations correctly.
2. apply the accurate words to state the right tense, case and gender.
3. make use of major components such as subject, verb and object etc. appropriately which can convey the thought of writer clearly to the reader.
4. make the text coherent to make the reader understand easily.
5. place all parts of speech properly.
6. apply the vocabulary and terminologies appropriately.
7. use the style of writing suitably to the requirements of the audience.
8. clarify the central ideas from the sustaining information.
9. avoid from jargon, slang, taboos and keep in mind the standard of language according to the mental level of the reader.
10. judge about the prior knowledge of the audience about the subject.

**Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were to find out students` competences in writing and to compare their competences in writing after one year of online learning due to COVID-19 pandemic.

**Method**

The target group consists of 44 part-time and full-time students of 2\(^{nd}\) year of English Philology Faculty of Kazimierz Pulaski University of Technology and Humanities in Radom. There are 32 students of full time studies and 12 students of part time studies. Four major keys required to calculate the differences: 1) sentence making/syntax, 2) level of accuracy, 3) tenses/ grammar and 4) handwriting.

**Research instrument**

The study research was used to assess the writing skills among students of English Philology. The material was from the course book ‘Successful writing’

\(^6\) Ibid.
by Virginia Evans (level: upper-intermediate), unit 8 (formal and informal letters: Letters Giving News, Asking for/Giving Advice letters, Letters of Complaint) for part-time students and for full-time students: describing people/places. Students were supposed to write a letter/ a description, using 150-180 words, by choosing one of the topics given:

Part-time students:
1. Last month you took part in a company training to learn about launching a new product into the market. Write a letter to your colleague from American branch of your company about this event.
2. Your friend has started a University degree studies. However, he has some problems, your received info from him: ‘I failed all my exams, so now I can’t continue my studies. I feel like such a failure, what should I do?’ write a reply giving him/her some advice about what he/she have to do.
3. You took a flight to the USA by your national airline. However, you did not enjoy the flight due to numerous difficulties. Write a letter describing them and asking for actions to be taken.

Full-time students:
1. You have been asked to write a composition describing the person you admire most in your life. Write your description for the newspaper.
2. A newspaper is running a competition and has asked to submit descriptions of a place they think is ideal for holidays. Write a description.
3. Your friend has asked you to write about your last trip at the weekend. Write your description.

Students had 60 minutes to write a letter.

Data analysis
The data was analysed on scoring basis. Students could get 16 points altogether for 4 areas: 4 points for sentence making/syntax, 4 points for level of accuracy, 4 points for tenses/grammar and 4 points for handwriting. The analysis was made in two stages.

In the first stage the data was analysed in these steps:
1. The average score of each category was calculated
2. The tables were fulfilled to show the frequencies.

In the 2nd stage, the analysis of significant difference in 4 major areas of full-time and part-time students was investigated.

Results
Each category was analysed separately. The performance of different variables like 1) sentence making/syntax, 2) level of accuracy, 3) tenses/grammar and 4) handwriting was analysed separately. The competency of writing skill was evaluated on the basis of syllabus for Practical English- Writing binding for the English Philology at Kazimierz Pulaski University of Technology and Humanities in Radom.
„Sposób obliczania oceny z poszczególnych form zajęć przedstawia się następująco: od 60% - 3 (dst), od 75% - 4 (db), od 90% - 5 (bdb)”. (from 60% - 3, from 75% - 4, from 90% - 5).

There are a few examples of students’ works as appendices.

Table 1. Performance of the 2nd year students in 1)sentence making/syntax, 2)level of accuracy, 3)tenses/grammar and 4)handwriting (full-time students)

<table>
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<th>grammar</th>
<th>handwriting</th>
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<td>average: 3.8</td>
<td>average: 3.1</td>
<td>average: 2.5</td>
<td>average: 3.28</td>
<td>average:12.75</td>
<td>average: 3.8</td>
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</table>

The overall result of students is 3.8 in average. They have the biggest problem with grammar that is why, the results in this category are the lowest with average of 2.5. There is slightly better average result in the category of level of accuracy,
this is 3.1. The average score of handwriting category is 3.28. The best results students get in the first category, which is syntax/sentence making.

Table 2. Performance of the 2nd year students in sentence making/syntax, level of accuracy, tenses/grammar and handwriting (part time students).

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The average result is 3.08. In grammar students get 1.6, a slightly better result they get in level of accuracy (2.4), the average result in handwriting is 3.0 and the best result they get in sentence making/syntax with average 4.0.

It can be noticed that generally students understand the topic and the content of their works is appropriate. There can be distinguished an introduction (1st paragraph) in which they stated the reason(s) for writing, the main body (2nd and/or 3rd paragraph) with the development of the subject and the conclusion (4th paragraph) with closing marks. Each paragraph deals with one aspect of the subject and starts with a topic sentence which gives the main idea of the paragraph.

In letters giving advice, there are suggestions introduced with appropriate language. In letters of complaint every paragraph is started with different aspect of the topic, the reason for the complaint is stated in the first paragraph, all complaints are supported with a justification, complaints and justification are linked together with the use of linking words. In the final paragraph there is a suggested action to be taken stated with closing remarks. In description of a person the introduction contains the name of the person and the time the author met/saw him/her, in the main body (paragraph 2nd, 3rd and 4th) there is a description of a physical appearance and personality characteristics and justification as well as hobbies, interests or activities he/she takes part in, and in conclusion comments and feeling about the person. In description of a place/building in the introduction students set the scene, in main body there is an overall look and particular details in conclusion there are feelings and final thoughts about the place/building and/or recommendation.

Students do not have a problem with the length of the letter, they used about 150 to 180 words. They successfully construct sentences using appropriate syntax in English that is why they get the best result in this category.

The second category, the level of accuracy, students get slightly better results. However, they make mistakes like using a loan translation, the sentences are sometimes difficult to understand, the reader can be confused and asking himself: ‘What was the writer thinking about?’ The results show that they have the biggest
problem with this key objective. They make a lot of mistakes both grammar, spelling and punctuation.

When it comes to grammar category there starts to appear the real problem. Students make a lot of mistakes. Unfortunately, the number of grammar mistakes makes the work difficult to read and understand, the reader can have significant difficulties in reading and grasping the concept of such piece of writing. The most serious problem is with reported speech. They cannot transform sentences from indirect speech into direct speech which they want to use in their letters. They make mistakes in incorrect use of the tenses. The same is with describing past situations together with references to the presence. What is more, they make a lot of mistakes with articles. They have difficulties with the proper use of definite and indefinite articles in their letters. There are also numerous spelling mistakes in their works. They have problems with writing simple words without making spelling mistakes like ‘everythink’, ‘enaught’, ‘to’ instead of ‘too’, ‘refound’, ‘agresively’, ‘cours’, ‘comepleatly’, ‘solucions’, ‘responsibilty’, ‘deferend’, ‘althouht’, ‘pleasent’, ‘beginning’, ‘methodes’ etc.

With regards to handwriting, students have little problems, however there are works which are difficult to read, some parts or words/phrases are unreadable. Students make numerous spelling mistakes. They are even confused how to write a simple word. The question is, where the problem is? Surely, they have been taught how to write words in English correctly, and now they do not understand why they make so many spelling mistakes while writing a piece of work by handwriting. The answer can be very simple, they use a lot of technological devices in their everyday life, at work, at the university and after more than a year of online learning. Their mistakes are being corrected automatically, by the programme, so they do not even notice what mistakes they make and when.

There is a problem with the English syntax, they cannot think and write in English, they still would like to express their thoughts using the same construction and rules as in Polish.

As it can be noticed there are differences in results obtained by full-time and part-time students. With full-time students getting higher scores in every category. They have less problems with 2nd, 3rd and 4th category, slightly better result is obtained by part-time students only in the 1st category. That is why, there appears a question, why? What is the reason their results are lower, they make more mistakes in grammar, spelling, sentence making and in handwriting. Both part-time and full-time students have the same number of hours of writing – 15 hours per one semester, the materials/resources are the same (the same course book), and they learned online during their first year of studies. This issue requires additional studies to be conducted in the future.
Recommendations

There are following recommendations on the basis of the conducted study research:

- Students need more training concerning the correct use of grammatical rules, spelling, punctuation and syntax which are essential elements of effective writing;
- All students should concentrate more on learning writing skills which allow them to gain proficiency in academic English;
- Students should have more practice with writing exercises especially with handwriting to improve their handwriting, to make it correct and fluent.
Appendix 1.

Dear Samu,

How are you? I’m sorry to hear that you weren’t able to attend the company training last month. It was quite an interesting event. I’m excited to tell you about the experience of working on the new product

It’s an easy task. It’s thought to be quite a lot of fun. I’ve been on this team and it’s a great time. I’ve met people in some fascinating places. We’ve learned a lot about how the product is produced. We’ve taken part in some interesting sessions. The sessions were really meaningful.

I must tell you about one very interesting exercise. For the first part of our task, we have been working on a simulation. We had to work about the composition. How it’s made and what makes it unique from the rest. Not many were familiar with the ingredients. A good simulation is a great before the meeting.

Next, we were looking for good names. We had to work a lot with these. The product should be named. Overall, the end of the event was quite rewarding. A new product was shown at the conference.
Appendix 2.

Northton Plam PR AT 39er
Subject 1

Dear John

How our company are doing in the United States of America? You know, we are doing great, but we are facing some challenges.

We have our branch in East Europe, and our new product called 'Startop' is something great.

It's about our new coding and deploying system on customers' websites.

We have a lot of young, smart minds working on it, increasing our market share.

After our recent events, our customers are coming very happy and they are fully satisfied.

Some big transactions are coming soon with the government, as well.

Our security is very important. We must make sure that every customer is safe.
Appendix 3.

It is a summer day and the playground is filled with children playing and having fun.

Anna Włodarczyk-Czubak

172
Julia Gibaja

Dear Victoria,

My last weekend was amazing. I was visiting Cracow. And as you know, it is my favourite city in Poland.

First of all, I have to say that the atmosphere is just different. You can meet a lot of interesting people, who are open-minded, loving and full of passion. That makes this place have a soul. Every time when I go there, I am making new friends. They always want to go for a party with you or just talk about everything, to be honest.

Of course, you have to know that is not everything. On every street, you can find old, historical buildings, museums or galleries. But on the other hand, there are...
References:
Burns and Smith limited.