

STUDENTS' VOICE ON FEEDBACK AND INSTRUCTIONS IN ACADEMIC WRITING (Based on Erasmus Teaching Experience in Slovak and Hungarian University)

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Although studies on the approaches and methods of teaching Academic Writing in university classroom are extensive, comparative studies on students' evaluation of the classroom strategies and techniques applied are still scant. A current paper is based on our comparative research conducted both at Slovak and Hungarian universities at the faculty of Humanities. The objective of this particular study was to explore senior university students' "voice" on feedback and instructions in EFL academic writing classroom. It suggests that the pinpoint is on the *students' viewpoint* rather than their supervisors'. Therefore, our task was to scrutinise the students' perspectives and based on them develop further research. Observably, the analysed data furnish more positive students' responses (within both Group A-Slovak and Group B-Hungarian) on feedback, as well as on being graded and being recognised as a writer. However, grading might be an issue in EFL classroom: based on the research, it awakes heterogeneous opinions of the respondents. The final section of the questionnaire was aimed at finding out how instructions for writing during studies can be improved. It is notable that both groups (A and B) (from 66,67% to 100%) consider feedback, professional tutoring, online support and extra courses in writing as an effective tool for improving writing skills within academic curriculum. A logical follow-up of the study might be investigating most appropriate and "customer-friendly" ways of feedback and instruction. This might further instigate creating resources to support the unfolding of academic writing feedback across EFL programme Europe-wide.

Keywords: academic writing; EFL students' voice; writing instructions; feedback.

Introduction

This paper has become possible due to European staff exchange (under the Erasmus programme) which enabled and encouraged us to prepare a special comparative questionnaire on developing academic writing in EFL classroom and collect a number of students' replies for further analysis and implications. Hence, our primary insight here is on EFL academic writing-related issues.

Noteworthy, there is an expanding body of publications on developing writing skills in a contemporary EFL classroom (Brisk, 2014; Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur, 2006; Fairbairn and Winch, 2011; Hedgcock, 2010; Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009; Nikolenko et al., 2021; Thomson and Walker, 2010, etc.). Substantial research has been carried out on causes of writing apprehension or anxiety and blocking, which can elucidate students' resistance to writing tasks (Hanna, 2010; Kara, 2013). Significant studies have also been completed on students' feedback and its effectiveness for further enhancing writing skills (Carless and Boud, 2018; Dmitrenko and Budas, 2021; Esterhazy and Damsa, 2017; Khan, 2016; Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009; Lee, 2007; Narciss, 2008; O'Keefe et al., 2020). Moreover, scholars emphasise that writing skills are to be considered when selecting an appropriate functional style in an act of communication (Leláková, 2015).

Writing has gradually become a vital technical tool of all kinds of professionals constituting an inseparable component of a learner's domain knowledge and literacy (Khan, 2016; Kostikova et al., 2019; Lazebna, Dychka, and Kotvytska, 2016). For this reason, today's EFL instructors are expected to train students on how to generate and organise ideas, how to use suitable grammar and vocabulary, how to draft, avoid plagiarism, use correct register (Hundarenko, 2019), how to begin and end, and how to proofread and edit a piece of writing. Thus, developing writing skills embodies today a very relevant and vast research field.

A current paper is based on the part of the comparative research conducted both at Slovak and Hungarian universities at the faculty of Humanities in 2019. The objective of the study was to expose senior EFL students' perspectives on writing in an academic setting, specificity of a writing programme at the university; to let them assess their own writing skills, display their perspectives to given feedback and instructions to further elaborate learning strategies for overcoming writing blocks and writing apprehension. The inquiry contributes to the body of knowledge on effective writing assignments, techniques and methods involved in everyday practice in Central European universities, which can make academic writing both a productive and joyful tool in English language acquisition process.

This study is focused on so-called students' "voice", a term coined for school-based inquiries (Leitch et al., 2007). It implies that the focus is on the students' viewpoint rather than their supervisors'. Notably, most pieces of advice and recommendations as the outcome of the EFL classroom explorations emerge from the

authors and supervisors' stance rather than from the students' perception of what works best for them. Hence, our task was to scrutinise the students' perspectives and based on them develop further research.

This study answers the following research questions: How do senior Slovak and Hungarian university students assess feedback in academic writing assignments? Which writing instructions do they consider as the most helpful ones in EFL setting?

Methods

Research Design

This research paper incorporates a quantitative study research design. We employed a structured questionnaire to collect needed data. Structured questionnaires are a means of a statistical survey, with most fixed choice answers (Chitez, Kruse, and Castelly 2015; Kvale and Brinkman, 2008; Payne, 2012). The goal of this questionnaire was to provide each respondent (anonymously) with the same questions in the same order to enable comparative analysis of sample subgroups and ensure confidence in their unbiased nature.

Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of two groups of the Central European higher education recipients: Slovak and Hungarian students (both majoring in EFL programmes): The group of Slovak students consisted of 14 participants (10 female and 4 male ones) of the age range between 22-26. Those were the students getting their master's degree in the field of Humanities at the university of Zilina, Slovakia. The second group was composed of 9 Hungarian students (7 female and 2 male ones). The age range is 21-24. Those bachelor's degree students were majoring in the Humanities at the Institute of English and American Studies, Eszterházy Károly University, Eger, Hungary. Alongside the study, we will call Slovak students as Group A and Hungarian students as Group B.

Data Collection

Data collection was at two different faculties of Humanities of EU universities: The University of Zilina, Slovakia and the Eszterházy Károly University, Eger, Hungary. Our initial goal was to collect data from more European universities while being on the Erasmus staff exchange programme in spring 2020 (that is IUM Academy School in Napoli, Italy). However, due to COVID 19, all business trips abroad have been cancelled, and this restrained the data collection process.

As a result, we had 23 questionnaires at hand, which facilitated the research with further prospection of enhancement and elaboration. Both groups filled in the questionnaire forms in October and November 2019. The Slovak group was tested during a regular class in Advanced academic writing at the faculty of Humanities of the home university of Zilina. The Hungarian group filled in the questionnaire during the Academic writing workshop once on the Erasmus staff exchange programme in Eger, Hungary.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The *first part* included general information which asked for personal data (age, gender, language/s, degree, department, and major/minor subjects of an applicant).

The second part focused on general questions on writing in study programmes (length and number of writing courses, number of graded papers in writing and specificity of a study programme – individual or collaborative).

The third part was centred on specific questions on writing (37 heterogeneous questions aimed at pinpointing students' viewpoint on writing as a part of the university curriculum, self-assessing their own writing skills, integrating writing into their future career, and evaluating feedback in EFL setting, see Appendix 1).

The final section of the questionnaire was based on writing instructions where students were supposed to rank offered options on writing instruction improvement in an EFL classroom.

Section 3 of the questionnaire was rated by participants on a scale between 1 to 5 (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). For further convenience of research description, we classified all the replies into positive ones (from strongly agree to agree) and negative ones (from strongly disagree to disagree), and uncertain, to get a wholesome idea of the students' evaluative stance on writing. Our primary goal was to see what role writing plays in each applicant's life, and how they personally evaluate it (positively, neutrally, or negatively).

Section 4 of the questionnaire had a focal point on the role of instruction in writing in applicants' academic life, in other words, how the instructions given during the studies can be improved. This part was scaled as: not at all positive/undecided/rather helpful and very helpful. For convenience purposes, we rated it as previous ones: positive, uncertain, and negative.

For the logical and concise approach to data collection, we have decided to divide 37 questions of section 3 into a few thematic groups:

THEME A (the broadest one): the questions are focused on personal attitude to writing in general and evaluation of personal writing skills within the academic setting; on the fair and decent approach toward completion writing tasks; on being involved into various writing activities; on technical aspects of writing.

THEME B: the questions are centred on “more advanced” writing tasks within the curriculum and their evaluation by students.

THEME C: the questions are aimed at connecting writing with the future career of an applicant.

THEME D: the questions are based on feedback and its role in an applicant’s life.

Section 4 includes THEME E: the questions are directed to find out the role of instructions in an applicant’s life. The task of this section (theme E) is to determine which methods of instruction are considered the most effective ones.

It is important to mention that our *current paper* is completely focused on THEMES D and E of the conducted research, e.g., the treatment of feedback and instruction by Slovak and Hungarian university students respectively. Hence, we will not concentrate on certain results achieved throughout sections A-C which have been highlighted in the other publication of the author (Hundarenko, 2020). In our opinion, “feedback and instruction” deserve special attention and require autonomous research to be carried out and distinctive conclusions to be made.

Results and discussion

The goals of this research were to find out how senior Slovak and Hungarian university students assess feedback in academic writing assignments and which writing instructions they consider as the most helpful ones in EFL setting. The students’ “voice” became a focal standpoint of the inquiry.

The methods applied incorporated a quantitative study research design with a structured questionnaire to collect needed data. With the help of this questionnaire, in total 23 participants (Slovak and Hungarian senior EFL university students) were examined anonymously for cross-cultural and subject-related comparative analysis.

Theme D of the questionnaire (table 1) is based on one of the most challenging aspects of teaching writing in an EFL classroom – feedback. Collecting many viewpoints together, there is no ideal recipe for this academic phenomenon yet. Ongoing debates about feedback initiated the publication of “how-to” articles, books, and chapters for teachers, effects of error correction, grammar instruction and strategy training (e.g., Bitchener and Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2011; Frodesen, 2001; Lane and Lange, 2011; Na Phuket., and Othman, 2015; Sermsook, Liannimitr, and Pochakorn, 2017; Sverdlova, 2021; Wasfy et al., 2021 etc.). A few feedback-related questions arise along with the investigation: Should error feedback be selective or comprehensive? Should it be direct or indirect? And then which is more effective and in which instances? Which tools should be involved into providing feedback? Who should better provide feedback: student writers, teachers, peers, writing centres consultants or private tutors?

Interestingly, the analysed data furnish more positive students’ viewpoints (within both Group A and Group B) on feedback, as well as on being graded and being recognised as a writer (table 1). However, grading might be an issue in EFL classroom: based on the research, it awakes heterogeneous opinions of the respondents. Surprisingly, the quote “I like to write even if my writing will not be graded” was treated more positively within Group A (8 out of 14 students, which make up 57,14%) and was not popular at all with group B (in total 2 out of 9 students, that is 22,22%). Evidently, some students might prefer being nurtured through the studying process by their supervisors, with detailed written feedback and evaluation provided (Boud, Lawson, and Thompson, 2015), while others can choose a less facilitative support and more independence (Odena and Burgess, 2017).

Another thought-provocative statement for an EFL instructor in European educational institutions might be a peer-review related one. The statement “I like others to read what I have written” got a low index with both groups A and B. This proves again that peer-review is not very common in Central European universities, as maybe it casts some doubt and uncertainty among students. In the Western tradition, on the contrary, teacher evaluation should be reduced and supplemented with peer or self-evaluation, when possible (Tai et al., 2017), and students should be integrated in more communicative writing tasks (Hassan, 2001, pp. 28-29). It is considered that peer- and self-editing sessions can build good proofreading and analysis skills. Moreover, this technique develops the feeling of responsibility and a habit of collaboration, which can lead to mutually beneficial outcomes (Ferris, 2003). The principal of collaborative learning and social constructionism is derived from Vygotskian view that “cognitive development results from social interaction” (Vygotsky, 1986). Thus, peer feedback can be rather advantageous: students can participate actively in their own learning process, can receive reactions and questions from authentic readers, can gain a clearer understanding of reader expectations, can obtain confidence, and reduce apprehension by seeing

peers' strengths and weaknesses in writing (Leki, 1990). Students might receive more feedback than a teacher alone may provide. Depending on their ability and experience with writing, many students can benefit greatly from peer response and guided self-evaluation as well as from feedback from outside sources such as writing centre consultants.

Feedback can have not only a "current" but also a "far-sighted" effect: "professional writers often participate in writers' groups because they recognise the value of another reader's feedback" (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009). Traditionally, scholars and authors submit to the blind peer review process required by journal editors and book publishers. Reviewers play a key role in providing quality expertise and critical standpoint.

Hence, continuing discussions with students and supervisors have identified feedback/support for academic writing as a key issue. It assembles complex connections with assessment criteria, creates a facilitating environment for writing and the students' own skills and builds confidence in academic writing.

Table 1. THEME D. Feedback and its role in an applicant's life

Writing Statements	Group A			Group B		
	Neg.	Uncer.	Pos.	Neg.	Uncert.	Pos.
I like to get feedback from an instructor on my writing.	7,14%	7,14%	85,71%	0,00%	0,00%	100,00%
I like my writing to be graded.	28,57%	42,86%	28,57%	0,00%	55,56%	44,44%
I like to write even if my writing will not be graded.	14,29%	28,57%	57,14%	33,33%	44,44%	22,22%
I like others to read what I have written.	50,00%	14,29%	35,71%	44,44%	11,11%	44,44%
I want others to recognise me as a good writer.	35,71%	35,71%	28,57%	11,11%	33,33%	55,56%

Examining Theme D questions, we present evidence that the analysed data provide more positive students' viewpoints (within both Group A and Group B) on feedback, on being recognised as a writer, with an only exception of the "grading" issue which appeared to be more sensitive with some of the students. Meanwhile, peer-review proved to be unpopular in Central European university EFL classroom in opposition to Western European approach (Tai et al., 2017), where the collaborative approach is a pillar of many classroom activities (Hassan, 2001; Ferris, 2003; Leki, 1990).

The final section of the questionnaire (theme E of our research) was aimed at finding out how instructions for writing during studies can be improved. This part was evaluated on the scale from very helpful to not at all helpful. However, for the convenience and compatibility of our research, we decided to evaluate answers similar to themes A-D from negative to positive (with uncertain in-between).

It is notable that both groups (A and B) are majorly positive in their replies to this section (from 66,67% to 100%). It implies that feedback, professional tutoring, online support, and extra courses in writing are viewed as effective tools for improving writing skills within the academic curriculum (see table 2).

Table 2. THEME E. The role of instructions in an applicant's life

Writing Statements	Group A			Group B		
	Neg.	Uncert.	Pos.	Neg.	Uncert.	Pos.
More courses in which writing is used as a means of learning (like seminars)	0,00%	21,43%	78,57%	0,00%	33,33%	66,67%
More feedback on my texts	0,00%	0,00%	100,00%	0,00%	0,00%	100,00%
Better instructions for my writing in existing courses	0,00%	14,29%	85,71%	0,00%	0,00%	100,00%
Professional tutoring for my writing (e.g., from a writing centre)	7,14%	21,43%	71,43%	0,00%	22,22%	77,78%
Online support for my writing (providing materials, instructions, models of good papers, etc.)	0,00%	14,29%	85,71%	0,00%	11,11%	88,89%
Training in writing to improve my powers of expression	0,00%	0,00%	100,00%	0,00%	11,11%	88,89%

Uncertainty in some replies supplied might be a cause of ambiguity and unawareness of the phenomena introduced in the statements (e.g., a writing centre is not a reality of the studied Hungarian or Slovak university, thus the students might have little idea how helpful it/they might be and get that “unfounded” apprehension that it will involve only more work on their side which they certainly will resist).

Assessing Theme E responses, we can presume that feedback, professional tutoring, online support and extra courses in writing are regarded by the students as an effective tool for advancing writing skills within EFL curriculum (from 66,67% to 100% positive replies). All this implies that the target students’ groups follow a more traditional approach in the evaluation of their writing and evidently fear new ones due to unfamiliarity and unawareness as well as anxiety before something new, which will demand more work and effort. These challenging aspects should motivate Central European EFL professionals to encourage students to meet new writing realities by introducing “fearless” and inspiring (rather than boring and strenuous methods) which can make writing activities both fun and gain. Having no perfect recipe for this academic phenomenon yet, each professional involved in teaching academic writing should scrupulously assess the abilities, cultural peculiarities and of course background of the target group to elaborate the best practices for developing writing instructions.

Having personal experience of US university-based studying process and being a while a part of Writing Centre in 2012-2013 at MIIS, CA, USA, we can say that their programmes are a way better equipped with multiple selection of methods and approaches applied. Many colleges and universities offer different types of support services for students who need extra help with writing, these include writing centres, learning skills centres, and other types of tutoring or advising services (Bruce and Rafoth, 2009; Reynolds, 2009). Besides, peer-review (see more above in theme D) is a way more popular in an American classroom setting than in a European one (based on our modest experience of teaching and doing research in Central and Eastern European universities). It develops the critical thinking skills of students and gives them a good chance to feel in the role of a feedback provider/evaluator as such. Peer- and self-editing sessions can build good proofreading and analysis skills (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2009, p. 110).

When students are incorporated actively in the process of identifying the scope of feedback, the possibility of meeting both students’ and the institutions’ needs and requirements may grow (Plonsky and Mills, 2006). However, studies have also revealed that such a match in the preferences does not come naturally. With no prior research, pre-planning or training, a match in the feedback choice/s of both students and teachers is almost circumstantial (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Montgomery and Baker, 2007). There should be a constant active interaction between instructors and learners to communicate and negotiate the needs of each side involved. A few international studies prove that students wish “to voice” their needs and to experiment with various feedback options (e.g., Leki, 1991; Lee, 2007).

To recap our discussion of themes D and E, we follow the standpoint of Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) that teachers of EFL students should see and understand the big picture: they should encounter a variety of challenges and various sets of circumstances while pursuing their goals. A teacher’s role is advised to be seen in the ESP and (we can add in EFL contexts) as: “Teacher, Course Designer and Material Provider, Collaborator, Researcher, Evaluator and ESP Practitioner” (Tyagi, 2012). Instructors should always be thinking critically and with future-oriented mode – it is significant not only to focus on curriculum requirements but rather on prospective students’ institutional and societal contexts along with the conditions they will operate.

Limitations

The study is not exempt from certain limitations due to the current COVID-19 pandemic situation worldwide. Initially, it was aimed to be bigger research involving at least three groups from the Erasmus+ programme partners’ universities, missing now Italian one. However, due to the cancellation of most trips abroad since spring 2020, the goal could not be fully realised, therefore, the study limited itself with only two groups of students (Slovak and Hungarian ones). Ideally, the research can be enhanced, and greater input will mean more objective results and a more comprehensive approach to the problem arisen.

Another limitation lies in the focus of the current paper – initially, it is a bigger inquiry incorporating THEMES A-E, which due to formal requirements to such papers was divided into two meaningful research parts (see Hundarenko, 2020, p.93). This paper is completely focused on THEMES D and E of the study: *the role of feedback and instruction in an applicant’s life* (focusing primarily on a student’s voice rather than an instructor’s one). Hence, hereby set goals and limitations can explain why in this paper we omitted certain results achieved throughout sections A-C.

Conclusions

In our humble opinion, this inquiry is not self-sufficient at all, as it requires a broader scope of the studied material, students, for example, potentially international ones, to get a more various and hence inclusive image of a very vital issue of effective feedback and instruction within an academic writing classroom today. Thus, the next point of the research might be the one that aims at a larger target group/s and at investigating most appropriate and “customer-friendly” ways of feedback and instruction whether it is (a) supervisors’ feedback; (b) training; (c) cohort experiences; (d) personal strategies for academic writing development or something else. To enhance the effectiveness of work, an instructor should apply any possible mean(s) available to fit learners’ needs and concerns. It is necessary to study these questions from students’ standpoint especially in a comparative/contrastive way as the replies can vary fundamentally from those of their supervisors’.

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