

**DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS - GRAPH DESCRIPTION<sup>1</sup>**

**Carmen-Cristina CATARGIU**

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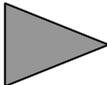
***Abstract***

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*To what degree can writing skills be developed during an academic semester? Is writing still important in this era of communication which seems to favour oral communication? What is the best method to adopt when teaching writing skills? This article contains a case study on graph descriptions which suggests answers to these questions. As teachers, we need to make room for writing tasks during classes, as it is only by practice that we can develop this skill. Writing does not come as naturally as speech, so the best way to teach it is to provide it with a context and a purpose.*

**Keywords:** process writing, integrated skills method, communicative approach, Business English



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***Introduction***

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Writing skills have been an area of interest for English methodologists for decades, as writing is one of the four basic skills in learning a language. Although there are many books written on the subject, few studies have focused on Business English within the field of English for Specific Purposes. Considerable research has been

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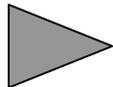
devoted to Commercial Correspondence, but little attention has been paid to other aspects, like graph description.

The aim of this article is to investigate the degree to which writing skills can be improved during the Business English seminars in an academic semester. The focus is on graph description, present in the first year syllabus in the Faculty of Agro-food and Environmental Economics and the Faculty of Economics.

What are the reasons for choosing graph description? First of all, this is a subject that students are not fond of, even less than other aspects of Business Correspondence. Secondly, most teachers find it difficult to teach and assess, and the results are always below expectations. Therefore, my interest is to see what goes wrong in the process of teaching and learning, to discover whether the teaching method and the evaluation criteria match, and why we encounter problems in this area in particular. Finally, I intend to raise awareness that Business English is more than specialized vocabulary and that writing is an important part of the business environment. Writing activities should take into account aspects such as cohesion and coherence, accuracy in spelling and grammatical constructions, paragraphing and structuring, to the extent to which they are essential for the purpose of communication.

This article is structured around the case study dealing with the teaching process of graph description, whose result is measured through the students' papers. The first part makes a review of the literature in the field, with emphasis on the approaches that are used in the Bucharest University of Economics, in accordance with international standards. The second part introduces the methodology used in the analysis of the data collected. Parts three and four present the case study itself, by describing, analyzing and interpreting the data.

This qualitative research study relies on two sets of data gathered from the first year students in the Faculty of Agro-food and Environmental Economics. The first set of information reflects the initial level of writing skills that students have mid-semester (in fall), while the second set is made up of their final test papers. My intention is to determine whether there is any improvement in their writing skills during the first semester, and in what particular areas.



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### *Review of literature*

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Writing is, as Byrne puts it, “the organization of our sentences into a text, into a coherent whole which is as explicit as possible and complete in itself, that we are able (or hope to be able) to communicate successfully with our reader” (Byrne, 1991: 2). When we are writing, we do it for a reader who is not physically present, and whom we might not know. We need to encode our message in such a way so as

to make it easy for the reader to decode it without any further help on our side, so that the text we produce can be interpreted on its own.

Most writers agree that writing is “neither an easy nor a spontaneous activity” (Byrne, 1991: 1) and requires conscious mental effort. We have to consider various ways of arranging and combining our sentences, draft and revise, and sometimes reread what was written before finding inspiration for further writing.

Writing is generally considered more difficult than speaking because it lacks the presence of “the other”, the reader respectively, and consequently, no immediate feedback is possible. The writer has to anticipate the reader’s reactions and to alter their text appropriately, while creating a context for their discourse.

The fact that writing is more permanent than speech has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the readers can reread as often as they feel the need to, at their own pace. On the other, once the writers sends their written discourse out there to be read, they cannot reconsider the text and change it. This is why writing is more dependent on the effective use of the linguistic resources of the language, on how we construct and link sentences to form a text.

There are certain, well-defined ways in which writing is more difficult than speaking not only in a foreign language but also in our mother tongue. The problems which are caused by writing are psychological, linguistic and cognitive. Even though we learn how to speak correctly according to different circumstances, it appears that we do it without too much conscious effort, as we talk about issues that are interesting or relevant to us.

Writing is, by its nature, a solitary activity, involving physical and mental effort and taking a lot of time. As writing is difficult even in L1, teaching it in a foreign language becomes even more challenging. One very significant factor which affects writing in a foreign language is that learners have at their disposal a limited amount of language. Teachers have to find a way to make use of the knowledge students have, challenging and motivating them at the same time.

Writing, however, “is learned through a process of instruction. We have to master the written form of the language and to learn certain structures which are less used in speech, or perhaps not used at all, but which are important for effective communication in writing” (Byrne, 1991: 5). Moreover, writing is a task that is, in most cases, forced on us, and this obligation increases the difficulty of the process and the resistance to it.

Thayer believes that writing is just another instrument that needs to be used in communication, and not an end in itself. He argues that it is more “advantageous to view writing not as a process *sui generis*, but as a tool of intercommunication.

As such, writing is a part of the “software” of the technology of communication. The function to be served is intercommunication, whether interpersonal or organizational, not the written document itself” (Thayer, 1967: 6).

Thayer thinks that much research is “anchored in the *interdependence* of writer and reader in intercommunication” (Thayer, 1967: 6). This interdependence is essential for the positioning of the writing process in communication since the reader’s competencies can be modified to fit the writer’s competencies, whereas writing skills can be altered to suit reading competencies.

Thus, language teachers need to make writing communicative. Most of the things we write in our real life are e-mails, notes, reports, curriculums, sometimes letters, and if we are students, probably assignments or essays. Some of us write articles or work on websites, forums or blogs. All of these writing tasks have a communicative purpose and a target audience. Yet, in the English language class, writing often lacks the communicative aspect. In most situations, the immediate purpose of writing is the assessment of the written piece by the teacher while the long term one, i.e. to communicate something effectively and efficiently in a specific context of your future job, seems blurred and even difficult to organize in a traditional classroom setting .

The communicative approach has greatly influenced classroom methodology for the past years, since it emphasizes task-oriented activities that involve the exchange of information and the free use of language without concern for mistakes.

Unfortunately, writing is rarely incorporated into a lesson, ending up as homework – which reduces the possibilities to be communicative. Teachers need to give learners tasks that are intellectually satisfying, especially when writing. Adult learners become aware of their limitations very quickly when they try to express complex ideas on paper. Thus, teachers need materials that provide relevant, real and communicative practice, something that is not usually easy to find.

Methodology writers like Ron White and Valerie Arndt suggest that teachers and writers equally should adopt a process writing approach. The process approach treats all writing as a creative act which requires time and positive feedback to be done well. In process writing, the teacher moves away from being someone who sets students a writing topic and receives the finished product for correction without any intervention in the process writing itself.

Teachers should be interested in this approach to writing because, according to White and Arndt, focusing on language errors improves neither grammatical accuracy nor writing fluency and they suggest instead that paying attention to what the students say will show an improvement in writing (White & Arndt, 1991).

Research also shows that feedback is more useful between drafts, not at the end of the task, after the students hand in their composition to be marked. Corrections written on compositions returned to the student after the process has finished seem to do little to improve student writing.

The role of the teacher is changing. The teacher needs to move away from being an assessor to a reader, responding to the content of student writing more than the form. Students should be encouraged to think about audience: Who is the writing for? What does this reader need to know? Students also need to realize that what they put down on paper can be changed. Things can be deleted, added, restructured, reorganized, etc.

Tribble defines the process approach as “an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models” (Tribble, 1996: 160). Thus, the focus shifts from the final product itself to the different stages the writer goes through in order to create this product by breaking down the task as a whole into its constituent parts.

Writing is a process that involves at least four distinct steps: **prewriting**, **drafting** (which tends to be *writer-centered*), **revising** (the document becomes *reader-centered*), and **editing** (Tribble, 1996: 160). It is known as a recursive process. While you are revising, you might have to return to the prewriting step to develop and expand your ideas.

Feedback is very important and, even though it takes a lot of time and effort to write, it is only fair that student writing is responded to suitably. Positive comments can help build student confidence and create good feeling for the next writing class. It also helps if the reader is more than just the teacher. Newspaper articles, swapping letters with other classes, etc. can provide an easy solution to securing a real audience.

Process writing is a move away from students writing to test their language towards the communication of ideas, feelings and experiences. It requires that more classroom time is spent on writing, but as the previously outlined activities show, there is more than just writing happening during a session dedicated to process writing.

Writing is a complex process and can lead to learner frustration. As with speaking, it is necessary to provide a supportive environment for the students and be patient. This approach requires that more time is spent on writing in class, but as previously noted, not all classroom time is spent actually writing. Students may also react negatively to reworking the same material, but as long as the activities are varied and the objectives clear, then they will usually accept to do so.

To summarize, I will mention the following advantages offered by this approach: it focuses on the process (not on the final product), it is reader-based (not writer-based), it is addressed to a real audience, and it offers a variety of techniques. Moreover, the teacher plays the role of guide, facilitator, and reader, while the student's role is one of sharing and collaborating. Grammar is a tool (a means, not an end), and the emphasis is laid on meaning, not form. We should also mention that evaluation and feedback are given permanently (not only at the end), making writing a creative process throughout.

Nevertheless, in spite of all the arguments in favor of the use of a process approach to the teaching of writing, the problem still remains in many circumstances that writing is not sufficiently prioritized, by teachers, students and curriculum designers, as occupying an important place in a communicative teaching syllabus. However, White and Arndt remark that many of the activities included in their book: "...include pair and group work, not to mention discussion and collaboration, so that the writing class becomes, in a very genuine sense, a communicative experience in which much more than skill in writing is practised and developed" (White & Arndt, 1991: 5).

Thus, the process writing class can be 'sold' to teachers, students and institutions alike as a typically communicative lesson, which can successfully incorporate all four skills, along with activities to build vocabulary and raise awareness of discourse and structure.

All of the above constitute valuable advice. They are, in my opinion some of the most important aspects of English teaching methodology and teachers use them every day during their English language seminars. Yet, doing research for this paper I found very little on ESP for Business English in the area of graph description. Usually, there is plenty of useful information on business letters, reports, memos or minutes, but very little on graph description.

Business English is an area of ESP that is rather poorly researched. There are three main characteristics of the language of business: a sense of purpose, social aspects and clear communication (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 8). Exchanges in the context of business meetings, telephone calls and discussion must have a clear purpose. Language is used to achieve an end, and its successful use is seen in terms of a successful outcome of the business transaction or event. Users of Business English need to speak English primarily so that they can achieve more in their jobs. Business is competitive, so performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake.

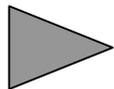
Ellis and Johnson say that "much of the language needed by business people (apart for social language) will be transactional: getting what you want and persuading

others to agree with the course of action you propose. The language will frequently be objective rather than subjective and personal.”(Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 8).

The social aspects are also important in the sense that they are highly ritualized. Formulaic language is used (when you greet or introduce yourself) in the context of a routine pattern of exchanges. You need to adopt a certain style that is polite, short and direct, as time is money in business and we need to be economical with both.

The information you convey in business needs to be clear and concise, using words and expressions that emphasize the logical process. Certain terms have evolved or been introduced to save time in referring to concepts that are familiar to business people. Most of these are acronyms (for instance CIF or FOB which stand for Cost, Insurance and Freight and Free on Board).

The Business English syllabus is usually defined in relation to business performance skills such as meetings, presentations, report writing, graph description. Within these skills areas, certain concepts are typically expressed describing changes and trends, quality, product, strategy, etc.



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### *Methodology*

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I have started this paper with the desire to find a solution to my own impediments as a writer, and to those of my students who keep arguing every year that writing has become somewhat futile. As a student, I perceived writing as the most difficult of all skills, as it involved practice and hard work on the one hand, and, creativity and a certain degree of talent, on the other hand, (while evaluation of both creativity and talent is mostly subjective). If the choice of verbal tenses is hardly debatable in a closed exercise, and there are clear arguments in favor of the choice made, in the case of writing, solutions are always less straightforward than they seem. I have very often heard: “it is better to put it this way” or “you should be more tentative” or “try and go beyond the superficial level”. All the above observations were true and valid in their own right, but if for some people words came naturally, for me they very rarely did. Except for the piece of advice that reading develops your vocabulary and greatly helps improve writing skills, the suggestions were rather scarce. I knew the evaluation criteria I was supposed to follow in my writing; yet, left by myself I did not quite find the best way to do it.

As for my students, they do not envisage writing as a must in their future career. As long as they have access to a computer and internet, they do not consider it necessary to improve their writing skills. Since most of the writing activities for the students of the Bucharest University of Economics are related to institutional writing (Hedge, 1990: 96), they feel this type of writing does not require a lot of

practice, as it is no more than a fill-in exercise with a specific layout, according to the task. They believe that the company they will work for will give them the format and the instructions to complete it, whether it is business letters, contracts, reports, minutes, memoranda or agendas. For the areas that require more creativity and originality, like advertisements, posters, or speeches, they simply rely on their intuition or intelligence. If the above scenarios should fail, they can always fall back on the internet as the ultimate source of information.

According to Tricia Hedge, writing can be divided into personal, public, creative, study, social and institutional (Hedge, 1990: 96). Institutional writing is related to professional roles and is needed by business people, teachers, engineers, or any other specialized fields. Each area of activity has its own texts and language students in these specialized fields can draw up specifications of their own needs.

There is a shift from the high school syllabus, which focuses on essay writing and letters so as to develop writing skills, to English for Specific Purposes, namely Business English for Economics. However, the evaluation of writing skills is based on the same criteria, irrespective of the level and type of English applied.

Students in the Bucharest University of Economics are supposed to have an upper-intermediate level in English, namely B2 (according to The European Language Portfolio- Self-Assessment Grid) at the beginning of their first year of higher education. B2 in writing means that "I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences."

Unfortunately, most of the students do not have the knowledge and skills required for a B2 level in writing. Moreover, the time needed to improve those skills is insufficient during the English seminars. During an academic semester there are 14 weeks, out of which there is one introductory seminar, a seminar for the final assessment and the last one for feedback and final results. Thus, there are only 11 seminars dedicated to teaching Business English. In the Bucharest University of Economics, a seminar or lecture lasts 80 minutes.

The teaching method we use in the Department of Foreign Languages is **the integrated skills method**. We attempt to combine as many activities that include the improvement of reading, listening, speaking and writing skills not only during a seminar, but also throughout the entire semester. Since these skills are used in real life situations simultaneously for communication, it seems naturally to teach them together.

The unit on Business Trends is dealt with in two seminars, namely seminars 5 and 6 on the semester's curriculum, which means that they are almost at the middle of

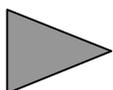
the semester. The first seminar introduces the specific vocabulary, while the second one makes use of the example in the textbook, followed by the group work activity, which is the starting point of the case study in this paper.

The aims of the lesson were: 1. to develop students' abilities to organize information and construct it into a text, 2. to develop students' abilities to revise, redraft and improve their writing.

The case study includes two sets of data collected from two groups of students in the Faculty of Agro-food and Environmental Economics. The first set of data includes the graph descriptions for activity 1 on page 33 in the textbook *Mastering English for Economics*. The descriptions were made in groups of 3-4 students to avoid resistance to accomplishing the task or the fear of a bad grade. This set of papers is based on 7 graph descriptions that were made after the illustration of a graph description in a written text (*America's foreign debt* on page 29 in the textbook), and 5 graph descriptions that followed the oral practice of a graph description (graph on page 36 in the textbook). The second set of data is made up of the 36 individual graph descriptions in the final test paper at the end of the semester.

The initial purpose of any writing activity is to improve writing skills, i.e. to help students evolve from B2 to C1 in the current situation, within the time limit of an academic year. C1 means that at the end of the year "I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can select a style appropriate to the reader in mind."

However, it is my personal belief that foreign language teachers should emphasize the fact that students need not only take an active part in the learning process, but should also take responsibility for the outcomes. No matter how modern or updated and adapted the teaching method is, the learning process cannot succeed unless both participants get involved in the process.



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***Research findings (case study-graph description)***

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As mentioned above, the first set of data includes the graph descriptions for activity 1 on page 33 in the textbook, collected from two groups of students in the Faculty of Agro-food and Environmental Economics. The descriptions are the result of a group activity, and each of the two groups used a different teaching method. One group had as example the written text *America's foreign debt* on page 29 in the textbook, while the other practised orally on the graph on page 36 in the textbook.

The reason for this was to observe whether the activities in the practice stage influenced the writing pieces in any way. As the mistakes were more or less the same and the two sets of papers did not present any differences in characteristics, I have decided to consider them together, i.e. 12 descriptions written as practice activity after the teaching stage.

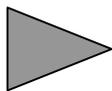
The data is organized according to the grading criteria used in our country, i.e. **structure** (paragraphing and structuring, cohesion and coherence, length constraint), **language accuracy and variety** (correct use of grammatical structures and connectors, range of grammar structures, connectors and vocabulary, accurate spelling and punctuation), **register and vocabulary**.

**Positive feedback** was provided on the above aspects, not only on the specific vocabulary, which was emphasized in the first seminar. Giving feedback, I felt partially responsible for the mistakes, because I somewhat assumed that students were familiar with the writing criteria, and they just had to take in the new vocabulary. The feedback session took place with the entire group, with specific examples from their papers, as well as extra material with examples of graph descriptions and general principles of writing. To motivate them to continue practicing, I also mentioned that this kind of exercise could be a subject for the writing section in the final test.

The second set of data is made up of 36 individual graph descriptions in the final test paper at the end of the semester.

The main areas that were improved are: a higher degree of consistency with verbal tenses, the use of connectors (on the one hand, despite, however, firstly, secondly, thirdly, in conclusion) and the use of paragraphs. If students make the description in the present or the past (usually the simple aspect), they keep it all through, although it would have been better to use past tense since the information in the graphs refers to the past.

The aspects that still need improvement are mainly consistency with verbal tenses, subject- predicate agreement, and correct punctuation.



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*Data analysis and interpretation (case study graph description)*

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While assessing the first set of papers, I tried to be as tolerant as possible regarding the mistakes. That was an assignment made in class and the students had 10 minutes to do the task. They had some practice on the topic before, but they did not

have time to draft or review the piece of writing. I relied on the fact that since this was a group activity, they would correct each others' mistakes.

I tried to ignore the spelling mistakes and focus only on the message, but in some situations the spelling led to confusion. If these mistakes could be somehow overlooked, the mixture of verbal tenses and the incorrect grammatical structures were so numerous and frequent that it was, in some cases, almost impossible to follow the author's line of thought.

The parallel structures and the repetitions, along with the lack of connectors made it very difficult for the reader to decode the message appropriately. Even the vocabulary, which was discussed and practised beforehand, raised a lot of problems, like confusion between different forms, or Romanian words anglicized.

What surprised me most were the critical thinking fallacies. In this situation, the linguistic barriers were no longer the case; the laws of reason were broken. Circular arguments like "we can see here at the beginning an increase in the first part of January and then a stagnation in the last part of January" does not say anything. Other examples like "the graphic line remains stable" or "the graphic line will decline." prove that some students either do not have the ability to switch from concrete to abstract or are unable to express it properly, or, to be more precise, students do not have explanation skills.

All mistakes, irrespective of the type, revealed the fact that students have little writing practice. Furthermore, I suppose that inadequate knowledge and poor understanding of the subject results in poor writing, such as wordy, rambling, evasive, digressive, disorganized, over-generalized statements.

During the feedback session, I tried to make students aware of the fact that the learning process does not finish at the end of the English language seminar, but they should also dedicate some of their free time to the improvement of their writing skills.

First of all, I showed students copies of the papers they produced the week before. In order to avoid subjectivity on their part, I switched the set of papers between the two groups of students. They were familiar with the subject since it was the same graph, but they did not waste any time trying to recognize their own pieces of writing or whether these belonged to any of their colleagues.

I asked them to find the mistakes and to improve the descriptions, a task that was fulfilled in groups. At the end of the activity we decided together upon the main criteria that should be considered when writing, such as grammatical accuracy, appropriate vocabulary, coherence and cohesion, communicative purpose. In speaking, the rules of accuracy may be bent more easily, but once you put it in black and white, it must be correct and clear.

Students received extra materials as well, including theoretical aspects related to writing and examples of graph descriptions taken from textbooks. As homework, they were supposed to describe one of the graphs on page 4 in the Financial Newspaper (the issue on Friday, the current week). The graph description should have been around 150 words long.

The second set of papers was assessed at the end of the semester, a month after the feedback. Two seminars plus the feedback session were spent on the discussion of graph description, only to move on to a new unit which dealt with Company Formation. In our university, there are few courses that deal only with developing writing skills. This aspect is usually integrated in language seminars at undergraduate level, and particularly post-graduate programs.

The second set of data showed an improvement in writing skills, especially in the area of coherence and cohesion. The use of connectors, the range of vocabulary, paragraphing made the text reader-friendly and easier to understand. Even though there were still challenges with the verbal tenses and the spelling, the descriptions were, by far, better than the previous ones.

However, we must keep in mind that these descriptions were the result of individual work. In my analysis I focused only on the aspects that were recurrent in most papers, and not on individual particularities of writing.

When we evaluate a piece of writing, we should assess, first and foremost, the functionality of the text, and not the perfection of the structure. If the communicative approach is used in teaching, we should keep the same attitude in assessment as well. We cannot teach a foreign language following certain criteria, and then evaluate it according to others. I feel that in assessing writing, teachers tend to give more importance to grammar and language structure rather than construction and communication of meaning.

Even though we focus on the message and the communicative purpose, the piece of writing should be comprehensible and reader friendly. The first rule in communication is to get the message across, but the form one gives to the message to achieve this is equally important.

Another impediment in the improvement of writing skills would be the increasing use of computers and software programs that allow you to check spelling, having thus diminished even more the importance of accuracy in writing. Although the computer program corrects your spelling and punctuation, it does not help you construct an argument or give coherence to a text.

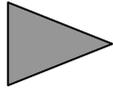
The most useful pieces of advice for me were to discuss examples of good and bad pieces of writing, and to encourage peer evaluation. I have put the advice into practice and I have noticed that students were really interested in achieving the task. Furthermore, they recognized that this type of activity made them become aware of their own mistakes, as it helped them develop a critical eye and the ability to argue their choices. They had to explain the reasons for which they considered it a mistake and to suggest ways of improvement.

Another aspect which I really liked was the idea of correcting drafts in pencil, focusing on the most important or relevant mistakes. If the teacher corrects every little thing on the drafts, and the piece of writing is not too good, it can be really discouraging for the student. However, this does not apply in the final version of the paper, because it can be confusing. It happened to me to have students wondering why the grade for the writing subject is so low when there are few mistakes marked on the paper. Since the feedback to the final exam is provided face to face, I prefer telling students directly what they need to improve rather than write it on the paper.

I strongly agree with the opinion that teachers should avoid using signs or short forms to comment on the mistakes. It is better to write in full your commentaries, or simply underline the mistake and let students figure out what needs to be modified.

The use of appropriate vocabulary and style is an essential concern, especially in business. Students need to learn to differentiate among different styles and what kind of language may be more appropriate for a given situation or audience. The idea of the communicative purpose and of a text written for a reader, that we mentioned in the review of literature, prove their relevance in this context. The tone of voice and the choice of vocabulary have to be altered according to circumstances and leadership. For instance, one can use 'asap' (the short for 'as soon as possible') in an e-mail or memo, but not in a letter or essay.

In institutional writing the tone of voice is supposed to be neutral and objective. This does not mean that we should use the same set phrases over and over again, even if this type of writing allows little room for creativity and originality. One of the things that bothered me the most while reading the students' papers was the repetition of the same words and phrases, like: "between 1964 and 1965", "between 1965 and 1966", "the profit is climbing", "the profit is declining".



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## *Conclusions*

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The aim of this paper was to investigate the degree to which writing skills can be improved during the Business English seminars in an academic semester, with a focus on graph description.

Writing is not spontaneous, like speaking. It takes time, and should be drafted, revised and edited. Therefore, the reader expects it to be fluent, accurate and logical.

When I became an English teacher at the Bucharest University of Economics, I had to learn, with the help of my students, not only economic concepts, but also how to write a memo or make up a business plan. The main priority was sound meaning and compliance with specific terminology. In time, as I gained more experience and confidence, I realized that in most situations, how you utter a thing is more important than what you say. So content and form of the message became equally important, especially in a business context where information and rhetoric are the key words.

When I chose graph description as the subject of my research, I had not expected that the greatest challenge would be teaching students to express themselves logically. English becomes just a tool that helps communicate ideas and opinions. Business English should be the instrument to develop critical thinking skills as well as linguistic resources.

The research study has proven that students have improved their writing skills. But there is still plenty of work to do to make it better. I think that the first thing we should do as teachers is to stop assuming that students already know how to write, because they were supposed to be taught before. And even if they know, practice makes perfect.

Moreover, language is a living organism, and it changes and grows as the rest of us. For instance, the use of jargon has always been a 'don't' in writing. I'm not certain this can any longer be applied in business, where every field has its specific terminology. Jargon is not a matter of disrespect for the audience, but a common language that makes communication efficient and helps gain time.

The increasing use of computers and the internet has modified language and changed the rules of communication. Abbreviations are often used in business e-mails, as, in a company, daily communication is done mostly through electronic mail or on the phone. Can teachers still reject jargon and abbreviations when they assess a paper?

One of the discrepancies I have noticed is that we argue that we use an integrated skills approach, but most of the writing is assigned as homework, due to lack of time. Students do not always do the homework, so writing is not practised. However, it is a compulsory task in the final test. We need to find a better balance between teaching method and assessment.

Writing is essential because it makes you structure your ideas and thoughts, and students should be encouraged to express themselves in writing. I know time is always a challenge during the Business English seminars, as there is simply no time to practice reading, writing, listening and speaking within 80 minutes.

Yet, I should make time to practise writing more often. Short tasks could be inserted in the lesson, or even a more developed project that could be developed all throughout the semester. I could also encourage them to peer-edit or proof-read their own papers, making them take responsibility for the learning process.

So far, I have encouraged students to communicate to me, when necessary, by writing an e-mail in English, thus practising their English and writing skills in a real situation. But more needs to be done. If we continue to assess students' writing skills in the final test, we need to create more opportunities for them to write, while they should find the motivation to pursue such objectives.

Furthermore, I will remind students that the grammatical and vocabulary exercises, even the reading tasks they are required to do are essential to improve their writing skills. Reading, listening, speaking and writing are linked, they support one another, and grammar governs them all. Yet, writing reflects the knowledge one has in a foreign language better than any other skill.

We cannot talk of good writing if we do not comply with grammatical rules, spelling, punctuation, and a wide range of vocabulary in the first place. The importance of the message, of the ideas we want to convey is diminished if the reader is constantly bothered by inadequacies of expression.

Although we all prefer speech to writing in and outside class, we cannot and should not delete the latter from the communicative process. When it comes to important issues, and I do not refer only to exams, but also to real life situations, everything must be in black and white. The written piece is long lasting and is the ultimate proof. If we want to master the art of communication, we need to learn how to write well. As teachers, we can introduce writing tasks in every class, we should constantly ask them to practise this skill, and, at the same time, try and make their endeavour easier by providing them a purpose and a context.

To sum up, writing skills can be improved if both students and teachers get involved in the learning process. It cannot go one way. The students that provided

the data for this research made steps forward along this path. But it is a long way ahead. They proved, more than anything, that they have little practice in writing. This can change if teachers provide authentic materials and original tasks to motivate students to carry on. The improvement in writing skills is an on-going process.

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