

DEVELOPING BUSINESS ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS: VIEWS OF STUDENTS AT THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES

Irina DAVID¹

Abstract

Despite its multiple benefits, writing has always been a problematic issue for business English trainers and their students, due to several aspects, among which the most significant ones are the fact that it is more time-consuming – therefore more difficult to integrate in the structure of face-to-face encounters – and less dynamic and interactive than other types of activities.

This article focuses on analyzing the results of a questionnaire completed by students at the Faculty of Commerce from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies regarding their opinion on the usefulness of business writing skills, their views on tasks designed to develop these skills, as well as their suggestions of activities that might increase their interest in enhancing their business writing competences.

Keywords: anti-Americanism; pro-Americanism; communism; post-communism

Introduction

This article aims to present the perceptions of undergraduate students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies on the significance of writing in English, as well as on ways of enhancing the effectiveness of writing activities by encouraging students to become active participants in such tasks. The ideas emphasized in the article are based on the analysis of questionnaires completed by 107 students enrolled in all three years of undergraduate study at the Faculty of Commerce.

Researchers and practitioners have no doubts on the benefits of improving one's writing skills. Hyland (2009) states that writing plays an important role “not only in our professional and social activities, but in determining our life chances” (Hyland, 2009: 2) and considers that “Writing is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it” (Hyland, 2009: 2).

¹ Irina David, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, irina.david@rei.ase.ro

In a study first published in 2007 and whose second revised edition appeared this year Graham, McArthur and Fitzgerald express their belief that developing writing skills brings benefits in terms of facilitating the improvement of other skills, raising people's awareness of their own experiences and allowing them to communicate their opinions effectively and persuasively. Thus, the three authors say that:

(...) writing is a flexible, versatile and powerful tool. Writing helps students learn and it can help them become better readers (...). Students can use writing to help them better understand themselves. Writing also allows them to communicate with, entertain, and persuade others. (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013: 7)

According to Warschauer (2010), there are three reasons why the development of writing skills is a relevant aspect of students' training. First, he emphasizes the importance of these competences in students' future careers, stating that "writing well is a vital skill for academic or occupational success" (Warschauer, 2010: 3). Secondly, he focuses on the role of writing in facilitating students' learning experience and helping them improve their ability to communicate in a foreign language. From this perspective, writing has the potential of becoming "an effective tool for the development of academic language proficiency as learners more readily explore advanced lexical or syntactic expression in their written work" (Warschauer, 2010: 3). Thirdly, he claims that writing activities can also encourage students to learn, remember and use information in a creative way. Thus, teaching writing does not – and should not – only improve students' ability to express themselves better in a foreign language, but also offers them the opportunity to develop competences related to thought patterns and strategies for organizing and presenting data. In Warschauer's opinion:

(...) writing across the curriculum can be invaluable for mastering diverse subject matter, as written expression allows learners to raise their awareness of knowledge gaps, abstract problem-specific knowledge into schemas that can be applied to other relevant cases, and elaborate mental representations of knowledge that can be more easily retrieved, while simultaneously allowing teachers to better understand the students' state of knowledge and thinking process and thus adjust instruction as necessary. (Warschauer, 2010: 3)

The same opinion on writing as means of developing critical thinking skills and creativity is shared by Scrivener (2005), according to whom "Writing involves a different kind of mental process. There is more time to think, to reflect, to prepare, to rehearse, to make mistakes and to find alternatives and better solutions" (Scrivener, 2005: 192).

My main concern in this article is to discover whether students themselves are aware of these benefits, in particular of the advantages of mastering writing skills in English, which would improve their chances of being able to communicate effectively in the multinational business contexts they hope to become part of after

they graduate. I also intend to identify the main reasons why they sometimes seem unwilling to participate in writing activities during seminars of business communication in English, expressing the opinion that spoken communication should represent the main focus of face-to-face encounters with their teachers. Another area of interest is represented by eliciting from the respondents to the questionnaire recommendations for making their participation in writing tasks more effective and enjoyable.

Students' Views on the Relevance of Improving Business Writing Skills

The first section of the questionnaire distributed to students focused on identifying their perception on the significance of writing. More specifically, the respondents were asked to rate the amount of time dedicated to improving specific language skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing – on a scale from 0 to 5, where 0 means no time dedicated to the improvement of a specific skill during business English seminars, and 5 means as much time as possible dedicated to the respective skill.

Before analyzing the questionnaires, I assumed that most students would place speaking at the top of the list and writing at the bottom, since during seminars they often seem to welcome other types of activities more than the ones involving writing. They did indeed express a clear preference for speaking, which in their opinion should represent the main focus of business English seminars. However, as it can be seen from the figure below, writing skills were actually the second in terms of how much seminar time students consider that should be allocated to improving them.

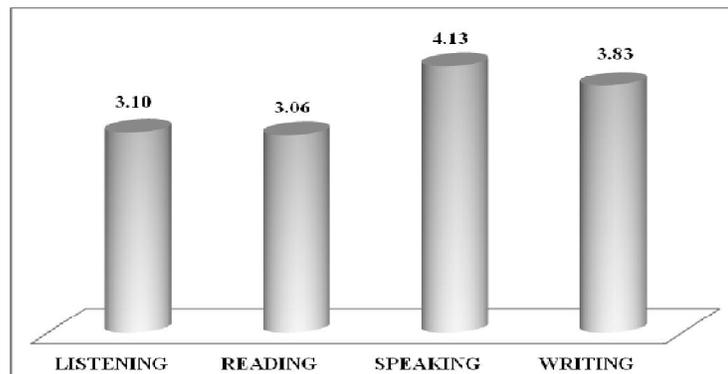


Figure 1. Students' opinions regarding the amount of seminar time spent on developing specific skills (on a scale from 0 – no time to 5 – as much time as possible)

Regarding the reasons why they perceive the improvement of business writing skills as an important aspect of their training, most students stated that in their opinion writing is a better tool for learning English. Thus, they showed that writing

activities help them understand the meaning and use of new terms and at the same time prevent them from forgetting words, expressions or grammar structures they are already familiar with. Some students also described writing as a good opportunity to test their knowledge of the English language, as it offers them the opportunity to see whether they can express themselves accurately, using a wide range of vocabulary structures. They also feel that writing sometimes encourages them to “think in English”.

An interesting idea emphasized by the respondents is that writing provides opportunities for the development of personal competences. For instance, several students claimed that writing activities encourage them to be more creative. According to them, this happens mainly because they have more time to think of the message they want to transmit and they can let their ideas “float free”. They are also encouraged by the fact that they do not have to worry about the immediate reaction of the receiver of their message, who may not agree with their original or unconventional ideas. Apart from creativity, writing can also enhance self-assessment skills. As those who answered the questionnaire stated, when they get involved in writing activities, they have more time to reevaluate the content and the form of their text and to identify their own mistakes. Unlike speaking, writing allows the senders of the message to go back to their text and evaluate it themselves.

Professional advantages that improved writing skills can bring were also mentioned. Students emphasized the importance of being able to send a message in correct written English in order to be understood by other people and to avoid embarrassing situations when others become aware of mistakes in the texts or documents they receive. Furthermore, some respondents consider good writing skills will offer them a competitive advantage in their future professional life, as most people of their age can express themselves fairly well in spoken English, but significantly fewer can achieve a high level of performance in written English.

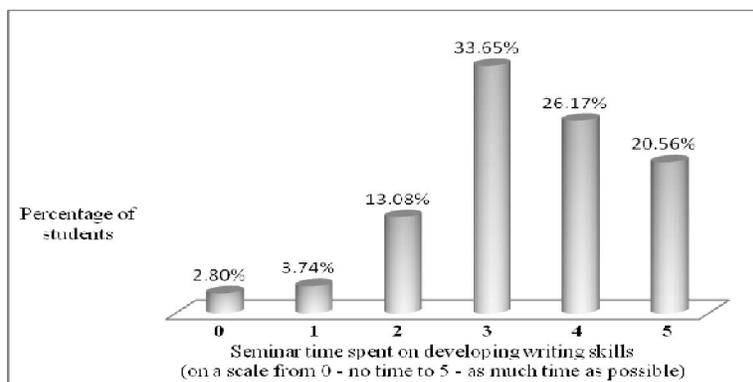


Figure 2. Students' opinion regarding the amount of seminar time spent on developing writing skills

In light of the benefits mentioned in the previous paragraphs, it is clear why most of those who completed the questionnaire expressed their desire to participate in writing activities as often as possible during business English seminars. Figure 2 provides a graphical presentation of students' choices.

As the Figure shows, a significant percentage of the 107 students who completed the questionnaire consider that the development of writing skills should be given special attention and be treated as an important element of business English seminars.

Reasons Why Writing Activities Are Not Fully Enjoyed by Students

While acknowledging the importance of written communication in English, students still express their reluctance to participate in writing activities. A reason mentioned by most of them is that more time spent on developing writing competences during the seminar automatically means less time for improving their speaking skills. Some of them stated that during high-school their classes of English focused on writing in the detriment of speaking, which they feel they should be exposed to more. At the same time, a few comments revealed that respondents sometimes perceive writing in English as a backup plan, as a form of expression they could resort to if spoken communication fails due to misunderstandings. Some students in the 3rd year of study – the last in the undergraduate cycle – even consider that at this stage people who have problems communicating in writing should simply turn their attention toward improving their spoken communication skills.

Writing is also avoided because many students associate it to assessment or testing. Therefore, they think writing should not be designed as an activity to do during the seminar, but rather as a homework-related task to be evaluated by the teacher at a later time. This makes them feel self-conscious and unsure, as they think they make too many mistakes or do not know enough words to write good business-related texts in English. There are also some comments which reveal that for some respondents to the questionnaire writing is only enjoyable if they know the answer to the questions being asked.

The third set of reasons referred to students' feelings regarding writing tasks. Most of them consider writing is not enjoyable, even boring, due to the fact that it lacks the interactivity and spontaneity that define activities designed for improving speaking skills.

Strategies for Increasing Students' Interest in Activities Designed to Develop Their Writing Skills

After expressing their opinions on the usefulness of improving their writing skills in English and on the reasons why activities designed for this aim are not always welcome, students were encouraged to make recommendations for improving the effectiveness and impact of writing activities. The analysis of their responses reveals there are two main areas they chose to focus on: the benefits resulting from such activities and the entertaining value of writing tasks included in the structure of business communication seminars.

With regard to the positive results of developing writing competences, the main comments made by the respondents are the following:

- students would feel encouraged to participate in writing activities during the seminar if they were confident that their teachers would provide support by giving them relevant information about unfamiliar terms and structures;
- the teachers should provide immediate feed-back and make students aware of their mistakes while they are performing a written task so they can make the necessary changes and corrections before finalising the document;
- the teachers should offer students the opportunity to perform regular writing activities, so that they become more confident and gain the skills necessary for tracking their own progress in terms of producing written texts in English.

According to students' comments, one of the reasons why they seem unsure of how to approach writing is represented by the fact that they are not exposed often enough to such activities during their seminars. At the same time, they consider that since writing involves constraints related to time limits and access to materials that could provide support, their teacher should be willing to participate in the activity whenever required. In terms of feed-back, they would prefer instant assessment rather than having their texts taken by the teacher and brought back to them at a later date.

In relation to the entertainment value of writing activities, students' suggestions for raising their interest and making them more willing to participate actively are summarised below:

- writing business documents seems more approachable when students are offered clear templates or models before being asked to produce such documents;

- the topics students are supposed to write about should allow them to express their own opinions freely;
- writing activities should be integrated in a real-life business-related context – many students claim it is easier for them to write a text based on previous discussions held with colleagues, for instance by simulating a meeting or negotiation;
- writing tasks during the seminar should be designed as teamwork activities rather than individual ones, allowing students to get involved in collaborative work with their colleagues and benefit from each other's language skills and ideas.

Conclusions

As shown in the previous sections of this article, my analysis was based on the responses provided by 107 undergraduate students at the Faculty of Commerce, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, who were asked to complete a questionnaire on their opinion regarding the relevance of writing in English, as well as their reactions towards writing activities.

The study revealed that most students acknowledge the importance of developing their writing skills for enhancing their learning experience and improving their employability chances. However, many of them claim that writing is not always an enjoyable task to perform. Compared to activities aimed at developing other skills – in particular those focusing on spoken communication – writing is perceived as less interactive and less dynamic. In students' opinion, writing activities are more enjoyable when they do not represent individual tasks and are instead designed as team activities. Secondly, students think that the entertainment value and the effectiveness of such activities are increased when writing becomes part of a real-life scenario and when teachers use an integrated approach in designing writing tasks.

References and bibliography

- Graham, S., MacArthur, C. A. & J. Fitzgerald** (eds.). 2013. *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Hyland, K.** 2009. *Teaching and Researching Writing*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Scrivener, J.** 2005. *Learning Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan.
- Warschauer, Mark.** "Invited Commentary: New Tools for Teaching Writing", in *Language Learning & Technology*, 14: 1 (2010), pp. 3-8, < <http://llt.msu.edu/vol14num1/commentary.pdf>>, accessed on 10 February 2013.

The author

Irina David is an Assistant Lecturer with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. She has a BA in English and French languages and literatures from the University of Bucharest (2002), an MS in Business Communication in English (2005) and one in English Language Education and Research Communication in Business and Economics (2008) from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In 2012 she received her degree of Doctor in Philology from the University of Bucharest.

She co-authored several textbooks on business communication in English and she is the author of various articles which focus on cultural and methodological topics. Her main areas of interest include applied linguistics, the methodology of teaching business communication, cultural issues related to language training, or developing critical thinking skills.