

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract: *Academic writing in courses taught in English is one of the areas which pose challenges for university students. Due to a lack of consistent practices in teaching writing in secondary education, school graduates encounter serious difficulties in their transition to academic discourse and writing in English required for some disciplines. The article discusses students' attitudes and perceived challenges in writing, and reveals discrepancies between students and instructors' perspectives. The discussion is mapped against the widely researched area of challenges in academic writing, and is based on analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, obtained from a small-scale survey with BA and MA students of English studies in a Bulgarian university, and focus-group interviews with their instructors. The findings of this interdisciplinary study provide insights into students' challenges in academic writing. It also helps to raise students' awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, and identify areas for instructors' intervention and remedial work.*

Key words: *academic writing, challenges, perceptions, discrepancies, interdisciplinary*

Introduction

Academic writing in English as a foreign language can be a multi-dimensional challenge for Bulgarian university students, and is also perceived as such by their instructors. In Bulgarian universities writing is consistently taught as one of the four skills in the so-called 'practical English classes', which are different from English for academic purposes (EAP), classes, dedicated mainly to teaching students how to write different types of essays. In the first type of writing classes students work on developing their receptive (listening and reading) and

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productive skills (speaking and writing) building on what they have already learnt and mastered at school, and working towards higher language proficiency and acquisition of basic academic skills. In addition, they have a discipline called 'written practice', which is mainly dedicated to writing dictations, since they are part of the 'state', or graduation exam in English. Dictation, which is a widely-used form of integrative testing will not be discussed in this paper, as we will mainly focus on writing as an end, the type of writing in which learners create texts which serve certain purposes and meet specific genre requirements.

The main types of written texts which students are required to produce and submit for evaluation in EAP classes are different types of essays (most of them following the formats and requirement similar to the exam essays written for IELTS, Cambridge exams or TOEFL). However, they are also expected to write academic or research essays, usually assigned as term papers for different subjects, such as literature, linguistics, methods in teaching English, and a number of elective courses taught in English. Whereas the requirements for writing different types of essays (opinion, balanced-argument, advantages and disadvantages essays, problem and solution) are more or less clear and consistently followed by different instructors teaching EAP, the research paper is more problematic, as the lecturers have different requirement and expectations about the form and the content of these types of written papers. Frequently, students experience more difficulties with the latter type of text, as they are not aware of the requirements, have never read or worked with research papers before, and find it difficult to search for reliable information and use it to convey the intended meaning without plagiarizing from the source texts.

An important area of research on academic writing is the instructors' perspective and the discrepancies between their viewpoints and learners' perceptions. The outcomes of this research can be used in establishing collaboration between university students and academic staff with the aim of improving instruction on teaching writing. In this context it is also worth investigating learners' motivation for writing, the role of feedback on writing which they receive, and the place of assessment of students' knowledge, analytic skills, critical thinking and language ability based on their writing.

The aim of the present article is to discuss students' attitudes and perceived challenges in writing, and to throw light on some discrepancies between students and instructors' perspective on the same issues. Our study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. What challenges do university students face when writing academic assignments?
2. What are the academic staff's views on students' problems in academic writing?
3. Are there any differences between the students' and academic staff's perception of difficulties in academic writing?

Literature Review

Research on learners' challenges in writing often falls into the broader discussion of the deficits in their writing production. However, in the context of academic writing, a different, more sophisticated conceptualization is proposed in the model of Lea and Street (2006) who discuss three overlapping perspectives on students' writing: (1) a study skills model, (2) an academic socialization model, and (3) an academic literacies model. Seeing writing and literacy as primarily individual and cognitive skill, the first approach focuses on the surface features of the language form which students can transfer from one context to another. Academic socialization is students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres, and the acquisition of ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy typical of a disciplinary or subject area community, which can be reproduced by learners unproblematically. The academic literacies model sees literacy as "more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes including power relations among people and institutions, and social identities" (Lea, Street, 2006, pp. 228). As the authors point out, the skills model and the academic socialization model have guided curriculum development, instructional practices and research in different academic contexts. Bulgarian higher education context is not an exception to this trend, as the two types of written texts targeted by instruction – the essay and the academic research paper, comply with the practices described in the first two models. This implies that despite the linguistic and cultural background, university students face similar problems when producing written academic texts in a foreign language. Thus, for example, in working with source texts and summarizing them for the purposes of their research, Bulgarian students experience difficulties related to understanding the gist and details in the source articles, differentiating between the voice of the author and the research they refer to in their texts, identifying the author's stance and the interrelation of ideas in the literature review sections of summarized articles. In writing their papers they tend to rely exclusively on their own opinion, expressed without caution in passing judgments, and do not usually use hedging devices (Ivanova, 2020).

Challenges in academic writing have been discussed widely and consistently in different contexts; in addition to small-scale surveys which target specific problems, there is the so-called "research synthesis", which tries to make sense of the vast body of research in second language writing (Silva, Brice, 2004; Leki, Cumming, Silva, 2008; Silva, Matsuda, 2010; Hinkel, 2011). The areas covered in these comprehensive reviews include challenges in discourse construction (Plakans, 2009), development and arrangement of ideas, cohesion, coherence (Fareed, Ashraf, Bilal, 2016), grammar and vocabulary (Hinkel, 2004), plagiarism (Pecorary, 2003), assessment (Brooks, 2012). Most of these problems result from differences between L1 and L2 in terms of organizing, structuring and utilizing discourse moves; constructing, placing or omitting thesis statements; different approach to rhetorical development, argumentation, persuasion, exposition/

narration; neglecting to account for counterarguments and to anticipate audience reactions; supporting arguments and claims by means of statements of personal opinions and beliefs; leaving argumentation unsupported; sequencing ideas and explanatory information differently; less fluent and less detailed/explanatory prose; shorter and less elaborated texts; relying more on personal opinions and including less fact-based evidence in argumentation and exposition; over- or under-estimating the amount of readers' background knowledge and the need for textual clarity, explicitness, and specificity; delaying or omitting thesis/main point statements; shortening conclusions/closings; employing different strategies for extracting/citing information from sources, as well as paraphrasing, quoting, and including source material in their own writing. In terms of text cohesion researchers draw attention to less frequent and less dense usage of cohesion devices; relying on repetition in order to paraphrase or establish cohesion; developing prose that is oblique and vague, or using moralistic and emotionally appealing approaches to argumentation and persuasion (Hinkel, 2011).

In addition to compiling a comprehensive list of challenges, researchers have identified a number of individual factors which affect students' writing. Even if students' language proficiency is sufficiently high, it is not the only factor which guarantees their success in writing (Hyland, 2006). The process of developing one's writing ability involves interplay between learners' cognitive and linguistic resources. In a longitudinal study of developing the writing process, Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson, van Gelderen (2009) found that the resource-demanding nature of linguistic processing in foreign language composing might limit the attention to other aspects of text production, such as content or general textual features, an effect which they called "inhibition hypothesis". Similarly, research conducted in Spain gave insights into the close interaction between the foreign language writer's composing and linguistic competence (Manchon, Murphy, Roca de Larios, 2007). Hinkel (2004, pp. ix) also draws attention to "the language tools (i.e., the grammar and vocabulary that L2 writers must have to construct academic text, which in turn can be organized into a coherent written academic discourse)".

Learners' individual factors exist in close connection with contextual factors, leading to a great variability in foreign language writing (Cumming, 2001). Culture-specific teaching practices in writing can also pose challenges for learners. As Dien (2004) points out, the process approach to writing, which requires the creation and improvement of multiple drafts in response to teacher's corrective feedback, is not easily accepted by learners who expect to produce a single final version of their text which is usually submitted for evaluation. Some types of writing, such as persuasive writing in which the concept of audience is very important (Connor, 2002) do not receive the necessary attention at school, as a result of which university students find them difficult. Awareness of the audience impacts the content and coherence of the writing as well (Brisk, 2011). It is linked to the writer's responsibility to make the text clear and understandable for the readers, an idea which is often misunderstood by Bulgarian learners.

In some contexts, learners' writing proficiency in their own language is a factor which comes into play. For such students the motivation to write and improve their writing is only temporary, extrinsic and dependent on other factors, such as assessment. It is not perceived as important in students' further lives and career opportunities. In many higher education contexts, including those in Bulgaria, most under-graduate and some post-graduate students have not received formal training in academic writing before entering their programmes, an important factor pointed out by Hyland (2016). In addition, in view of recent demographic problems, in a lot of institutions the initial testing of students' academic literacy prior to their programme entry is less demanding, a problem discussed by Lin and Morrison (2021).

The role of educational context in shaping learners' perceptions of writing skills development, can be further specified and narrowed down to a differentiation between second language (SL) and foreign language (FL) teaching contexts. As Manchon (2009, pp. 2) points out, "the manner in which writing is learned and taught in FL contexts is dependent upon a whole set of material conditions and social practices that do not necessarily coincide with those of SL contexts". Research in a FL context reveals a significant influence of students' prior L1 and L2 writing experience and instruction on both the development of writing ability and the shaping of L2 writers' attitudes towards writing (Rinnert, Kobayashi, 2001).

An important area of research which has relevance to the discussion of learners' challenges in writing and to improving instruction and syllabus design, focuses on the differences between the perceptions of students and academic staff. There have been comprehensive studies of goals for academic writing from the perspective of students and their instructors (Cumming, 2006), which presented a contextually-grounded multifaceted picture of academic writing around the world. A recent study conducted in three universities in Hong Kong, identified major differences between students and instructors' views regarding academic writing challenges. Whereas the main concern for most of the graduate students was challenges at the sentence level, the instructors highlighted challenges at the discourse level. The study also revealed some student strategies for managing academic writing challenges, such as the need for providing appropriate writing models and writing interventions for L2 graduate students in Engineering. (Lin, Morrison, 2021).

The nature of student-instructor communication in the process of mastering academic writing has also been discussed in a number of studies, such as those by Starfield (2010), Howells, Stafford, Guijt and Breadmore (2017) and Mason and Hickman (2019). They emphasized the importance of feedback and the supportive network, especially in the work of doctoral students, writing their dissertations. These studies confirm Hyland's finding that most students approach their academic writing by "probing in the dark and learning from mistakes" (Hyland, 2016, pp. 453). This observation is closely linked to research findings related to students' writing strategies and the dominant role of experience and

training (Manchon, 2018) in comparison to culture-specific practices in one's native writing traditions (Forbes, 2019).

Background, participants and methodology

As it was already mentioned, the students in BA and MA programs taught in English at Shumen University have to complete different types of academic writing tasks. The learning objective of composing particular types of texts such as essays, for instance, is the practice of writing as a skill as part of students' overall language development. Other writing assignments, such as those required for the purposes of formative or summative assessment in different subjects taught in English are aimed at developing and evaluating students' critical thinking and their abilities to interpret texts in producing literary analyses, reviews or theses for theoretical courses.

The present small-scale research was aimed mainly at examining students' perceptions of their difficulties in academic writing and making a comparison between students' and their instructors' perspectives on the issues. The survey was conducted at the beginning of 2022 and its purpose was to encourage students' reflections on their writing performance and thus help them identify the problematic aspects in it.

The participants in the survey were 25 students enrolled in BA (72%) and MA programs (28%) in English Studies at Shumen University, which is one of the state universities in Bulgaria. The respondents were contacted by email and invited to complete the questionnaire. The participation in the study was voluntary and the number of students willing to take part in it was surprisingly small, which is an issue that has recently arisen when collecting data either for obtaining feedback or for research purposes. Five academic staff members directly involved in teaching English for academic purposes gave their consent to be interviewed face-to-face, and the interviews were audio-recorded. One of the instructors was a native speaker of American English and his views revealed a different perspective on academic writing which follows the requirements of Anglo-American tradition in this discipline. The data from the interviews were later analyzed with the aim of identifying some emerging patterns and comparing them with the findings from the students' survey.

Two survey tools were selected for collecting data – a questionnaire for the students and a focus-group interview for their instructors. Both tools are frequently used to conduct research in other academic spheres of humanities, namely psychology and social sciences, which makes the study interdisciplinary in its nature. Receiving feedback from students is necessary for several reasons. Firstly, asking students to reflect on their writing performance raises their awareness of what aspects they need to work on and improve. Secondly, the findings of the survey provide insights from students' perspective, which compared with instructors' observations and ideas can lead to identifying possible areas of intervention and remedial work.

The instrument used for obtaining the data from the students was an online questionnaire which consisted of 10 questions (6 open-ended and 4 closed-ended). Two of the closed-ended questions provided Likert-type options, and were aimed at establishing the degree to which students enjoy writing and can evaluate their own writing. The other two of the closed-ended questions asked students to choose from a range of given options (multiple-choice questions). They were aimed at identifying the types of academic writing tasks assigned at university and the aspects of writing in which students need further help and instruction. The open-ended questions aimed at eliciting more detailed responses in the following areas: identifying the most challenging tasks and elaborating on the nature of the challenges; availability of specific instruction on writing; the frequency of writing assignments; the most difficult aspects of writing a research paper; preference for written or oral assessment in a course; similarity between challenges in written and oral performance (see Appendix A).

The interviews with the instructors were the other research tool for gathering data. In them the instructors had to answer questions which mainly mirrored those for the students thus aiming to look at the same aspects and identify any significant similarities and differences in the perceptions of the two parties involved in the developing students' skills in writing academic texts at university (See Appendix B).

Data analysis and discussion

The main findings from the analysis of the students' questionnaire are presented and discussed first, so that an overall picture of their perceptions of academic writing is created, in which the main areas of research interest are highlighted as subsections for a clearer and more structured discussion. The instructors' views obtained from the focus-group interview are presented and discussed in relation to students' views in the same subsection. The subsections are presented as headings in the data analysis and discussion section below:

Students' attitude to writing

The first question of the survey focused on gaining students' general perception of writing and their attitudes to writing. The majority of the respondents (76%) agreed or strongly agreed that writing is enjoyable, 16% could not decide, and for 8% of the participants writing was not an enjoyable activity (Fig.1).

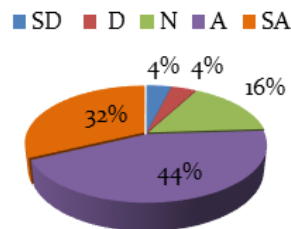


Fig.1 Students' attitude towards writing

Instructors also agree that most students are willing to write and improve their writing, especially when writing different types of essays. They shared the impression that students like free writing, and are sometimes unaware of the differences between free or creative writing and the academic writing with its strict genre-related requirements. One of the aspects of academic writing which undergraduates are not well aware of is that most of the academic writing genres, such as review or summary, require extensive reading and analyzing of subject-specific research.

Types of academic writing tasks

In the second question, respondents had to mark the types of academic writing tasks they had been assigned at university, choosing from a selection of options. 96% of the respondents marked essays as the most frequently assigned writing task. Term papers, traditionally known in Bulgaria as 'kursova rabota', a kind of research papers in which students research relevant sources and write their exposition on a pre-selected topic, were chosen by 88% of the respondents, followed by summaries and reviews with equal shares of 44%. 20% of the students marked paragraphs and 13% - articles. In the category "other" two students added abstracts and analyses.

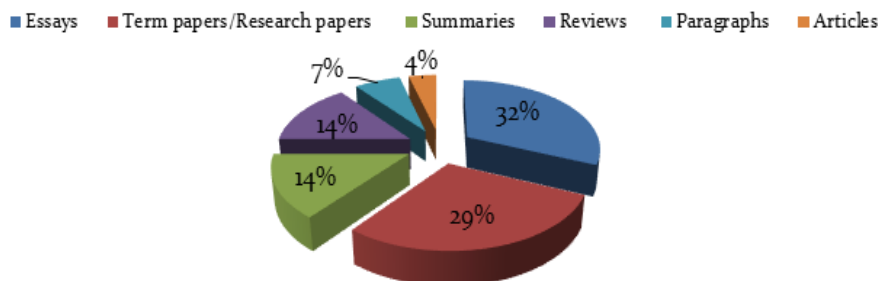


Fig. 2 Types of academic writing assignments

Instructors' opinions parallel those of the students, confirming that research papers and essays are the most widely used types of academic writing. Reviews and summaries are usually assigned as part of larger papers, such as BA or MA theses and end-of-term papers required in different subjects such as literature, linguistics or different elective courses.

Instructors also agreed that assigning essay writing especially in the initial stage of academic writing instruction provides a very good foundation for developing further and more specific writing assignments as general essays follow the same structure and the principles as those typically assigned in other academic courses. Additionally, essay writing eases the transition from what writing experience students might have from school to more complex writing tasks in academic context.

Most challenging academic writing tasks

The following section aimed at exploring which academic writing tasks the participants found most challenging. More than half of the students admitted encountering difficulties in writing term papers/research papers, essays ranked second according to 31% of the respondents, and other tasks such as summaries, articles, analyses came next with 13,63% (Fig.3). The results related to writing research papers might be considered quite predictable bearing in mind that prior to their university studies students have extremely limited experience of reading and writing academic texts. However, most students receive instruction on writing essays at school, especially at foreign language schools in which English language is studied intensively.

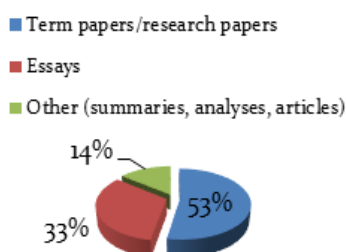


Fig.3 The most challenging academic writing assignments

Two of the interviewed lecturers said that they assign research papers, usually at the end of the term, and these papers play an important part in students' overall grade for the respective subject, however lecturers' view is that doing research is generally challenging for the students. Each of the lecturers has their own requirements for the papers which might not be applicable to other subjects (at least the lecturers weren't aware of the existence of unified criteria for writing research papers), so they considered it their own responsibility to instruct students on the specific requirements and even to provide them with sample papers to be used as models for students' writing. In this way students have to comply with specific requirements for each subject, and if they lack previous experience in writing research papers, it is not surprising that they find this type of academic writing assignments most challenging.

Instructors who teach academic writing say that students have been asked to write different types of essays: opinion essays, balanced-argument essays, advantages and disadvantages essays, and problem and solution essays. According to two of them, the most challenging is the problem and solution essay, and a common mistake which students make is focusing more on the problems and not providing a solution to each of the problems they have pointed out. The majority of the instructors agree that students face most difficulties with the structure of the essay, as they are strongly influenced by writing Bulgarian essays. The native

speaker's observation is that students' difficulties are rather a combination of argumentation, essay structure and understanding reasoning. This is indicative of the differences in prioritizing aspects of writing in the Bulgarian and Anglo-American academic writing. Another important problem is that sometimes in the introductory paragraph students copy the information from the task using exactly the given words, failing to paraphrase them. In some essays the introduction is missing completely – students start answering the question directly.

Another common mistake is failing to focus on the specific task, e.g. when asked to discuss both sides of the argument and give their own opinion, some students focus on one side of the argument or do not state their opinion. Some students struggle in maintaining focus throughout the essay, which leads to an unbalanced and incoherent essay.

Style and register are the other aspects students appear to have problems with. At advanced levels, learners should be using language they already know in new ways or contexts, or use more sophisticated expressions. However, some students still find it difficult to say the same things in different ways, either by paraphrasing or by using synonyms.

Writing instruction at university

In relation to the previous question, the students were asked whether they have had specific instruction on how to write a term paper/research paper at university. Due to the fact that 85% of the postgraduates answered positively, it can be assumed they have been provided with some preparation doing their BA programs at university. 61% of the undergraduates also gave positive answers. One of the undergraduates' comments raised doubts about students' possible misconceptions regarding the difference between general instruction and specific requirements for a particular academic writing task in view of its genre or purpose: *"Sometimes we are given criteria. (But not always)"*

Some of the responses revealed students' uncertainty which may be due to a variety of reasons such as irregular attendance of writing classes and hence lack of the opportunity to receive detailed instruction on academic writing, in vague responses such as *"not really"*, *"Yes, but I don't remember specifically"*, *"No, not exactly"*.

An undergraduate's comment also raises questions about how students perceive their training in writing: *"There are unwritten rules everyone should know from school or an older friend"*. Answers like that are indicative of a persisting, possibly culture-specific mentality of writing ability as a manifestation of personal intelligence, social skills or coping strategies rather than as a skill which results from the application of explicit requirements and criteria which are learned consciously and developed continually in the process of learning how to write.

The lecturers' opinions regarding the instruction in writing do not display much variety among respondents. They consider their instruction clear

and sufficient, and tend to explain students' difficulties with factors related to students' general language proficiency or personality features such as motivation, perseverance and willingness to learn from mistakes. A lot of their issues are also related to procrastination and poor time management in conducting research and writing their papers. The instructors agree that the main task of a tutor is to provide students with feedback so that the same errors could be avoided in future writing assignments. However, not all students are expected to benefit from feedback if they do not use it to learn from their mistakes and intentionally work on improving their writing.

Frequency and continuity of students' writing experience

As it was mentioned earlier, students are engaged in academic writing with the ultimate goals of practicing the skill and being assessed. The same goals are pursued by teachers of English at school. For example, the results of a survey conducted among Bulgarian school students who sat a maturity exam in English showed that 28% of them do not do much writing in class, and, as a result about 20% of them admit to having difficulties in expressing themselves in English (Ivanova and Gerova, 2020).

Students' responses indicate the dissimilarity between the average number of assigned writing tasks in both BA and MA programs as 73% of the undergraduates state that they are assigned to write research papers up to 3 times in an academic year, while the average number of academic writing tasks per semester, as reported by 71% of postgraduates, is 6-7. Apparently, students in the Master's program are evaluated more often through research papers than undergraduates. This fact can be related to the following question which addresses the various problems both groups of students have when handling such a writing task.

The frequency of students' writing depends not only on the number of assignments given during the semester and throughout the whole course of instruction, but also on their individual participation in it. Therefore, the differences in their responses to the question how often they are assigned writing tasks reflect entirely their individual performance and motivation to write, and do not provide reliable account of the frequency and number of writing assignments, as planned by the instructors. The instructors were unanimous that writing is pre-planned as part of the syllabus for the respective disciplines, but students' progress and achievement ultimately depend on their personal motivation and diligence.

The most difficult aspects of writing a research paper

The differences between undergraduates' and postgraduates' responses to this question are quite revealing in terms of the assistance they need and expect to be provided with by their instructors. The majority of the postgraduates (42%) pointed out that researching a topic and planning and preparation are the aspects that require more time and effort, while for 28% of them it is filtering the appropriate and reliable sources of information (Fig. 4). The percentage of

the undergraduates, who considered finding the specific relevant information the most attention-deserving aspect, is 44%. However, for 16% of the undergraduates the most difficult part of writing is organizing their thoughts and structuring their papers (Fig. 5).

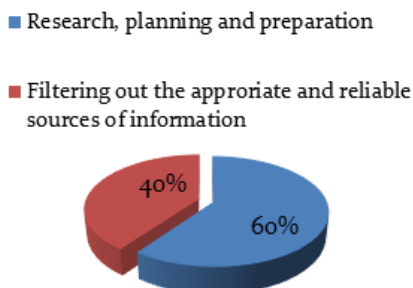


Fig. 4 Postgraduates' difficulties in writing a research paper



Fig. 5 Undergraduates' difficulties in writing a research paper

Lecturers who teach disciplines different from EAP and assign research papers as part of students' summative evaluation consider working with information sources one of the areas which cause difficulties, especially for undergraduates who look for information online. Very few BA students would have heard of Google scholar for filtering information sources and finding relevant research. According to the native-speaker lecturer, students' difficulties in writing research papers are evident in their heavy dependence on Wikipedia as primary and practically a single source which prevents them from engaging with academia to conduct extensive research. Moreover, they often take information directly without any attempt to look for different sources, paraphrase and convey the ideas in their own words; sometimes even pasting the copied information with the Wikipedia footnotes.

The percentage of MA students who know how to search for information is not very high either, and is usually limited to the few students who opt for writing a thesis instead of sitting a written exam for their graduation. Even in this case, students rely mainly on the lecturers or their academic supervisors for a list of

recommended sources. Planning and structuring research papers is another area identified by instructors in which both under- and post-graduates need support. The reasons were mainly students' unfamiliarity with the required structure of the research paper, and the lack of habits in planning before writing.

Aspects of writing in need of further instruction

Following the previous question, the respondents were asked to indicate which aspects of writing a research paper they need further instruction on. The students had to choose among options, such as planning and preparation, structure and layout, citing and referencing, language and style, the process of writing itself, and editing, with the possibility of selecting more than one option. Citing sources was the area chosen by the highest percentage of the respondents (41.6%), followed by planning and preparation and structure/layout with equal shares of 37.5%. Language and style required assistance for 33% of the participants in the survey, and the process of writing was chosen by 20.8% (Fig.6). Editing was selected by only 16% of the students, which can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it might be considered a less problematic part of the writing process, but on the other hand, it can be speculated that respondents ranked it low because they do not recognize its importance.

Drawing a parallel between undergraduates' and postgraduates' responses, it can be noted that along with citing which both groups find the most problematic, language and style are selected as areas in which both undergraduates and postgraduates need more help. It is noteworthy that there are certain differences between the two groups of students. Thus, if undergraduates thought that they would benefit from receiving further instruction on structure/layout, in contrast, only 14% of the postgraduates chose this option. Presumably, the latter are familiar with the requirements for structuring their papers, having learnt how to do it in their BA studies. Another difference between under- and postgraduate students was related to planning and preparation for writing, an area in which undergraduates seem to need more help than postgraduates.

Instructors' prioritization of difficulties revealed some differences from that of students. Citing or referencing of sources is considered one of the most serious problems, even though each lecturer makes sure students know what referencing system to use. However, due to the lack of uniform requirements across disciplines, students get confused, and use a mixture of different referencing systems.

Both under- and postgraduates need further sensitizing to the specific genre features in academic writing. Instructors suggested that providing students with more exposure to different genre samples and explicitly discussing their features will help learners overcome the difficulties in recognizing and later reproducing these features in their writing.

Adhering to more formal academic language and style also needs further attention. The problem is more common among undergraduates, but some

postgraduates also experience difficulties in using formal language and caution, especially when expressing their opinion on an issue, or when commenting on other researchers' viewpoints.

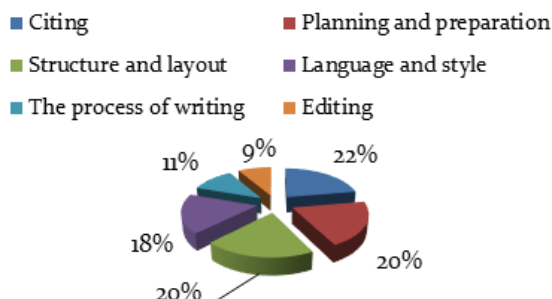


Fig. 6 The most problematic components of writing research papers

Preference for oral or written form of exposition for the purposes of assessment

The eighth question aimed at revealing students' preferences in reporting their research in the form of oral presentation as opposed to writing a research paper. All the respondents offered detailed explanations for their choices which add important insights into reasons for their preferences. For 64% of them preparing a presentation on a certain topic appeared to be vastly preferable to writing a paper (Fig. 7). Presenting in front of an audience is seen as a way to overcome anxiety related to public speaking, arrange one's thoughts in a clearer way and develop one's speaking and presentation skills. Some students said they feel more confident and capable of expressing their thoughts orally than in writing. Apart from defining presentations as interesting and more enjoyable and appealing for young adults, students believe they are more common and easy to do. A few stated that presentations mean less writing which apparently is a misbelief among students, as the most important and meaningful component of a presentation is its written content. Several students made the constructive comment that the choice between the two formats depends on the subject and sometimes the presentation is the more appropriate format.

A much smaller percentage of students said that they prefer writing a paper (16%). Some of them pointed out difficulties in speaking in front of others, their love for writing or a better way of organizing and structuring their work as factors determining their choice.

Instructors who use oral presentations as part of their assessment procedures confirm that when given the choice, most students opt for presenting orally. However, they say that students tend to underestimate the written component in the PowerPoint presentation, some of the presentations lack logic and coherence, and the language used in the slides is often simplistic, informal

and not academic. The native speaker instructor pointed out that presenting “disguises plagiarism but it is actually more visible” for the instructors who can easily detect the discrepancies between the students’ proficiency level and the language used in the presentation. The students do this with the presumption that it is presenting the slides to the audience that matters and not its contents. One of the reasons for these problems is that students have not been instructed in making presentations – it is not part of their EAP classes. Students do not seem to realize that the most essential part of the presentation is the exposition of the ideas and the logic of the text and not the design and additional elements, the function of which is only supportive.

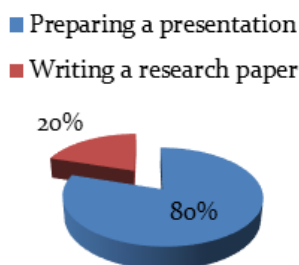


Fig. 7 Presentations vs. writing a research paper

Comparing difficulties in reporting research: oral presentation vs. written paper

Exploring in more depth students’ difficulties in dealing with oral and written academic discourse, the next question aimed to find out whether students encounter similar difficulties while preparing the content of an oral presentation. The prevailing responses were negative, given by 54.5% of the participants. They regarded making presentations more flexible in terms of structure. As far as the text in a presentation is concerned, they consider “word count” not a relevant criterion, as the information is presented more briefly compared to the paper format with its harsher requirements. The respondents who admitted having similar difficulties with tasks in both formats are 36%. Surprisingly, some students (9%) shared that they do not have much experience in preparing presentations, although this type of assignment is known to be quite largely used at school not only in language classes.

Instructors’ observations do not differ significantly from students’ opinions. However, instructors mentioned the impact of personality factors, such as self-esteem, risk-taking and anxiety on students’ oral presentations. They also stated that language proficiency and willingness to speak in front of an audience are important factors which influence students’ performance.

Self-evaluation in writing

The last entry in the survey focused on exploring the participants' abilities to evaluate their own writing. Self-evaluation is a very significant metacognitive skill which in the context of writing prompts students to reflect on both their performance and the achieved result – the text they have composed. The highest percentage of responses (36%) was given by participants who expressed uncertainty about being able to evaluate their writing. A plausible explanation can lie in the broad conception among Bulgarian learners that evaluation is delegated mainly to the teacher and students are not expected and prepared or taught how to assess their own work. Yet, our data provide evidence of a change in students' perceptions, as those who agreed and strongly agreed that they are capable of evaluating their own writing fall into two groups with equal percentage of 28%. Only 4% reported that they find it hard to self-evaluate (Fig.8).

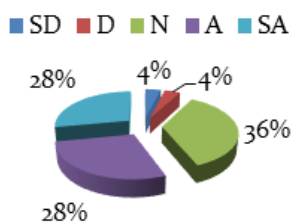


Fig. 8 Students' abilities to self-evaluate their writing

According to the instructors, self-evaluation is one of the most problematic areas in students' writing. They confirm that students expect instructors to evaluate their written work, simply because it is their professional responsibility and they know how to do it. In addition, instructors confirm that most students have never worked with assessment criteria, and have a poor idea of what is actually assessed. Very few students, who have done exam preparation for IELTS, Cambridge FCE or CAE exams before entering university, remembered being familiar with and having worked with assessment bands for writing. Two of the lecturers who are also involved in teacher training said that they have familiarized students with assessment criteria in writing and even provided them with some practice in applying criteria with the aim of improving their first drafts by using feedback based on criteria. Nevertheless, self-evaluation remains an area which requires a systematic approach and more consistent work from both instructors and students.

Conclusion

The results of the study revealed a number of challenges in writing in general, and in academic writing in particular, which university students face in the course of their studies and as part of assessment procedures. Students' responses showed that one of the important prerequisites for success is the positive attitude

to writing. Willingness to write and improve their writing, especially different types of essays is highlighted by the instructors as a positive factor in students' academic writing development.

Data from both groups of respondents identified research papers and essays as the most widely used types of academic writing. Reviews and summaries are usually produced as part of BA or MA theses and end-of-term papers required in different subjects. These longer academic texts were unanimously singled out as most difficult, which might be considered quite predictable bearing in mind students' limited experience of reading and writing academic texts. All instructors agreed that students face most difficulties with the structure of the essay, although they have had consistent instruction in writing different types of essays. Lecturers tended to explain students' difficulties with low language proficiency or learner variables such as motivation, perseverance and willingness to learn from mistakes.

The specific challenges identified by students include researching a topic, planning and preparation, and finding appropriate and reliable sources of information. Lecturers who assign writing research papers consider working with information sources one of the areas which cause difficulties, especially for undergraduates searching for information online. Other challenges involve citing sources, planning and preparation, structuring papers, academic language and style. These challenges might be the reason why students prefer making oral presentations to writing papers, due to the flexibility of the oral expression as an alternative to the rigidity and strict requirements of the written academic genres.

Students' uncertainty about self-evaluation in writing could be explained with the misconception that evaluation should be delegated mainly to instructors, and that students are not expected and prepared to assess their own work. This might be a consequence of a continuous experience of being excluded from evaluation, which results in inability to work with assessment criteria or make the most of instructors' feedback.

Data analysis helped us provide relevant answers to the three research questions which we posed at the beginning of our study; we identified some important issues in students' perception of writing, traced their potential origin in the local and global contexts of academic writing, and the way they correspond to the problems discussed in contemporary research on the topic. The main limitation of our study is the small number of respondents, a drawback which could be overcome by surveying wider audiences of students and staff.

The results of the research can be used to tailor and improve the content of the academic writing syllabus, so that it targets the outlined challenges and provides students with positive learning experiences in working on different elements of academic writing and critically assessing their own writing.

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Appendix A

Questions to the students

1. To what extent do you agree that you enjoy writing? Choose one option among: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.
2. What kinds of academic writing tasks have you been assigned at university?
3. Which of the academic writing tasks do you find the most challenging? Why?
4. Have you had specific instruction on how to write a term paper / research paper?

5. How often do you have to write a term paper / research paper?
6. What is the most difficult part/aspect of writing a coursework / term paper / research paper? Why?
7. What aspects of term paper / research paper writing do you think you need further instruction for?
8. Do you prefer to prepare a presentation or write a coursework on a certain topic? Why?
9. Do you encounter similar difficulties while preparing the content of a presentation?
10. To what extent do you agree that you are able to evaluate your writing? Choose one option among: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.

Appendix B

Questions to the academic staff members

1. What types of academic writing assignments do you give your students?
2. What type(s) of academic writing assignments do you think your students have the most serious problems with?
3. What components/aspects do your students have difficulties with?
4. What are the differences between the challenges your students face when writing an essay or research paper?
5. What are your students' preferences of reporting research – paper or presentation?
6. What is the difference between their performances when reporting research in a paper or presentation format?
7. Do you think that providing students with written feedback on their writing helps them improve their writing skills? How?