

Communicating Effectively in Written English, As an Essential Need in Higher Education; a Class Survey in the Second-Year Professional Study Program, University of Korça

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Abstract

This paper aims to give an overall analysis on the Written English subject, implemented in the second-year professional studies, “Office supporter for communication, library and archive”, at Fan. S. Noli, University, Albanian context, Korça city. This study shows how to make English texts and materials accessible and comprehensible in this field of study and in their future workplace. Tips in improving writing skills help students’ progress in written production. Data on students’ writing tasks and everything that needs to be improved are provided throughout this article. This article reports analysis of writing task and the results in students’ English language acquisition in general as well as the improvement of writing skills in specific. It is shown how can materials used in class, help students in using a good professional vocabulary in Written English. What is interesting and different in this study, is that it provides an innovative way in teaching writing with the help of technology, specifically through Google classroom and Google meet application platform. It stresses out the importance of written knowledge, and the fluency of linguistic elements in certain situations, as well as the increase in the students’ level for the use of language in written tasks. The description of the study program and common errors confronted during written English classes, are part of this study.

Key words: Written English, Higher Education, Professional Studies, communication, progress.

1. Introduction

Writing has a crucial role in foreign language teaching and learning. The writing process helps in elaborating thoughts and in expanding imagination.

Writing skill is very useful in a course. For students is very important to work on writing skills. By writing, students have more time to think, to prepare, to consider information, to make mistakes and to find alternative and better solutions.¹

To have good professional writing skills, students need to examine words and phrases of writing they do, to plan writing, and to organize writing clearly. Students need to use correct grammar and punctuation and avoid common errors. All these writing aspects and instructions are seen in the study and in students' tasks.

Writing helps to learn new words and structures; it is done more carefully and slowly than speaking. Written practice helps to focus students' attention on what they are learning and to make them more precise in the use of language. Many communicative class activities, may lead to writing activities.

The Written English subject is developed in Google Classroom platform, and Google Team application, during 2019- 2020 and 2020- 2021 academic year. It provided organization which is an important feature for students.

The way classes are organized, is mentioned in the study research instruments.

The study conducted in this article, is a mirror of teaching English writing at Korça University, in the 2nd year Professional study program "Office supporter for communication, library and archive", A2 level. Student- centered materials are given, so that they acquire general linguistic rules, and become aware to correct mistakes in their works. These materials encourage them to analyze language samples, discover rules, apply them in their own writing with increasing accuracy, and allow the students to recognize and self- correct errors. All this can be seen in the study where students' tasks are assessed and analyzed.

1.1. The importance of written knowledge.

Basic English writing skills are required everywhere. English may be learnt easily, but, writing grammatically correct is difficult. Writing needs practice.

Bilash states: "Writing is an integral and necessary skill Writing results in increased practice using the language. Connections can be made between the four key skills in learning a language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. These skills do not exist independently, they are interrelated; improving one, will result in improvements in the others"² Having effective writing skills empowers people, provides clear direction and increases productivity.

A good written communication makes people perform their jobs more efficiently.

A good writing influences the quality of your work and your professionalism. When you develop a strong understanding of writing, this allows you to maintain clear communication and accurate documentation at your work.³

Writing process is Focused on; a) audience b) vocabulary choices c) style of writing d) achieving purpose. Writing requires a great in- depth knowledge of grammar system and

¹ Scivener, J., (2005). Learning teaching, Second edition Macmillian, pp.192- 193

² Bilash O. (2009). Written production in SL classroom. <https://bestofbilash.ualberta.ca/writing.html>

³ Writing skills; definition and examples, by Indeed editorial team, June 9, 2021,

perhaps even than speaking. For many students writing is an important mean of learning. Writing helps them practice the material and store it in long term memory.⁴

This study tries to establish the writing tasks that students need to practice in English so that to be effective in their future job. Students are prepared to be autonomous members of the target professional community, and the set tasks, should be similar to real life tasks in order to enable students for the future situation. So, Written English is based on the analysis of students' specific knowledge in using English for actual communication.

Teachers don't simply 'teach writing', but also teach particular 'types of writing', which are expected in professional contexts. Writing is an essential job skill for students.

There are some goals to be taken into consideration when teaching writing: Students' confidence development, written performance monitoring, the exchange of information, opinions, ideas, the ability development in writing proficiently in English, at this study program, as a necessary tool in their future job.

2. The objectives of Written English subject in the professional study program “Office supporter for communication, library and archive”.

The 2nd year professional study program “Office supporter for communication, library and archive”, aims to offer professional competencies to individuals who need to work as office clerks in public or nonpublic organizations, such as libraries for adults and for children, archives in central and institutional level, and different structures which offer public services. English competencies should be as follows; students will be able to be competent in:

- Communicating professionally with public in transmitting institutional information.
- Having a good written performance in secretary tasks.
- Prepare, modify, edit, copy written information and documents and correspondences/ emails, develop, publish and register client services, data processing, by using the right and necessary programs for text writing.
- Classify and archive documents according to the appointed procedures.

The teaching materials in Written English subject are selected accordingly to the students' specific needs in this study program, taking into consideration its objectives, set in the syllabus and what this course offers to students' future jobs.

This module aims to clarify and interpret some of the main issues of the written English language at the A2 level; how the student can write a presentation about himself, how he can build simple paragraphs, how he can write formal and informal letters and email or even a simple application form, a personal profile on social networks, messages for different plans etc. The student practices on the proper ways of using language as well as structuring words in sentences; verb tenses, conjunctions, punctuation marks, verb patterns, etc. The course is based on the practical use of written language.

⁴ Chastain K, Lee (1988). Developing Second- language Skills, University of Virginia, pp. 246

This course aims to acquaint students with: the practical side of written language, in parallel with language formation. It also aims to develop vocabulary and expressions of everyday use of the English language, so that students have the opportunity to acquire basic writing skills in their own field of study in the English language.

The objectives at the end of this course are as follow:

- Students use the appropriate structures and order the writing of paragraphs properly.
- Use terminology of different fields and mainly from the language of offices and protocol.
- Know and use the basic skills of writing in English.
- Acquire specifically patterns of English verbs, improve the sentence agreement skills, learn mechanics, punctuation.⁵

The syllabus of this study program includes topics on basic rules about writing and building sentences in English language, sentence level editing, sentence agreement, word forms. After acquiring these basic concepts, they will be able to write a personal profile for a social website, write an application form, write messages, write an expression of interest, write different kinds of emails, by using the necessary explained concepts and terms and expressions.

3. The required written skills; Aspects of CEFR, descriptor scale

As they are actually presented in the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, some of the required written skills in this course are as below:

Written production

“In A2 level student can write a series of simple phrases and sentences about their present job.

He/ she can write short, simple imaginary biographies, diary entries that describe activities, using basic, concrete vocabulary and simple phrases and sentences with simple connectors”

Written interaction and correspondence

“Student can exchange information by text message, e- mail or in short letters, ... can convey personal information of a routine nature, in a short email or letter, ... can write simple notes and text messages for immediate needs, can fill in personal details on most everyday forms”⁶

4. The study; a class survey in the second-year Professional study program, Albanian context

4.1. Data analysis

The research: This study is conducted on the material and on the way how writing skill is acquired by the students in this professional study program. The objective of the classes is to

⁵ Syllabus of the course ESP 2-year professional studies “Office supporter for communication, library and archive”, Written English, PhD Edlira Xega, Fan S. Noli University of Korca ,2020- 2021

⁶ Common European Framework of reference for languages with new descriptors. © Council of Europe, February 2018; 80- 87

concentrate on the accuracy and fluency of linguistic elements in different situations, so that students can become aware of the use of the right language in written tasks.

The methodology used is based on a qualitative analysis; It involves an examination of A2 learners in the overall acquisition of English language, through writing process in the appointed tasks during classes. All this process is explained in details throughout the article sections.

The subjects involved and the research instruments.

Participants are chosen from the 2nd year of the professional study program for “Office supporter for communication, library and archive” in Written English subject. They are observed during English teaching classes in separate topics taught. This subject consists in 38 hours, held during the second semester. Learners’ differences are important in experience, context, attitudes, and behaviors.⁷ These influence the way they write and learn. The 2nd course consists of 23 students, A2 level.

The way classes are organized:

The observation is done by using Google Classroom platform and Google Meet application, Office 365.

At the beginning it was a little difficult, and the students were a little distracted and disorientated to be integrated in these online platforms. But by the clear instructions given, they became organized. Google classroom platform, helped in eliminating the risk of losing worksheets or homework assignments. Materials and written tasks are provided and evaluated in “Class works” assignments. They are graded respectively, by writing private comments for each student and adding comments for their mistakes. They are graded with the respective points and marks. All their grades are saved in folders in “Grades” section like online evidence, so that the students are very clear for their assessment. All the tasks are updated in real time.

Despite the above-mentioned facts, students’ performance, progress and engagement is not enough satisfying, compared with face-to-face teaching/ live interaction.

For teachers this platform provides very clear directives, it is accessible for many devices, All the assignments and documents needed can all be uploaded and feedback is easily given⁸.

The measurement of results

This study measures students' engagement in the writing process, the way paragraphs are structured, and the use of the right writing style. It explores their points of view, as well at A2 level, and using professional language, expressions and concepts, relevant to communication, library and archive.

4.1.1. How can materials used in class, help students in using a good professional vocabulary in Written English.

⁷ Wilde J.(2004) Guide to what works for English language learners , Washington DC, pp 16

⁸ The impacts of Google Classroom. December 2016

Besides the materials on the way how to write professionally, students in this study program are taught general concepts of English language. In this way students improve knowledge on concepts such as: Patterns of English verbs, Sentence agreement problems, Verb tenses, Word forms, Mechanics.

In suggested Writing topics, at the end of these explained materials, students are left to express themselves freely on a picture on any of the suggested topics. The aim is to put in written practice the use of the respective explained concepts mentioned above, to build good sentence structures, and to use the correct concepts by being creative and organized in ideas.

Later they are supposed to share writings with friends in Classwork section, to their selected mate, in google classroom, and encourage each – other by giving suggestions. Based on their friends' questions and suggestions, they think what to do differently, to make their own ideas clearer and more effective by rewriting them. So these tasks are very productive. They enhance and improve their communicative skills through writing.

In this way, besides the assessment of acquired and taught concepts, they are assessed on their writing development, organization, by avoiding redundancy, digression, unclear connections and language use, variety of sentence structure.⁹ Apart from all these mentioned, a few minor lexical or grammatical errors are accepted, in case the whole work is well constructed with the required elements of a good writing.

Below are presented two of the tasks employed with the class in the platform:

Task 1

Oral preparation is important in helping students preparing in advance for writing. A description (pictures) are presented to them. General information is given and some guiding questions are written on the whiteboard in the platform, in order to facilitate students assignment. These instructions and oral discussion is organized through google meet platform.

An example is provided below ¹⁰



Questions:

What do you see in the photograph?

How do you feel?

What does the photo make you think about?

Have you ever experienced a feeling of great success somewhere?

Do you like to participate in this kind of sport?

Suggested writing topics (100 words). Use complex/compound sentences. Underline conjunctions. Choose one of the topics below.

Is there an athlete you really admire? Why is he/ she?

What qualities does a person need to be successful? Do you have these qualities?

⁹ The official guide to the new TOEFL iBT, 2006, pp.260

¹⁰ Ascher A. (1993). Think about editing, Heinle & Heinle publishers, pp.263

Is competition important? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being competitive? Students prepare their chosen written task. They are left 20 minutes and they read or hand out in assignments. Tasks are checked and assessed with the respective comments and marks.

Task 2

Besides the above-mentioned tasks, two topics are taken into analysis and are based on real student writing. They are provided to enhance and refine students' recognition of common grammar issues, as well as vocabulary and specific professional phrases are learnt. The two topics are:

"An email about a business event" and *"Messaging to make plans"*.

It is analyzed how classes are elaborated.

These two topics are taken into observation. It is seen how students interact with each other and with the teacher, how the writing topics are treated, how they are adapted to the students' language level, how they affect in language acquisition and how they are able to make a good use of the learnt concepts, needed for their field of study.

Students are provided guidance throughout the writing process; brief writing exercises are assigned. It is stressed the importance of clear, thoughtful writing. Students use the necessary explained concepts and specific words and expressions.

In "Messaging to make plans" and "An email about a business event", there are pre writing exercises, which help students focus more in the writing task that comes afterwards.

They are set class work or assignment on writing a similar dialogue like the previous one or a similar email, based on the instructions and learnt concepts. In this way, they learn and practice better by enlarging their lexis, and express better their written work with new learnt structures.¹¹

4.1.2 Common writing mistakes in the 2 appointed tasks; An email about a business event" and "Messaging to make plans"

It is very challenging to recognize writing problems both for teachers and students. Common writing mistakes include a weak organization, long sentences, inadequate content, inconsistent usage, repetition, wrong structures and different grammatical mistakes.¹²

This research tends to establish a connection between what students learn from the teacher and what they produce in their tasks.

By observing and evaluating the previously mentioned written tasks; "Messaging to make plans" and "An email about a business event", we came up with the following list of mistakes which are explained in details through concrete examples, taken from students' tasks appointed above, and how to overcome them. In brackets are given the title of the material where these mistakes are found.

1. Subject- verb agreement errors.

¹¹ Questioning- Te Pyeturit Anglisht (1999), AEDP, Shtepia botuese LILO, pp.103- 104

¹² Kavaliauskienė G.(2010). Skills of reading, writing and translating in English for specific purposes , Volume 3, pp 11-23

- “Everyone **want** to attend this meeting” instead of “Everyone **wants** to attend this meeting.
 - “I am attaching **informations**” instead of “I am attaching **information**”.
 - “The committee **meet** on Thursday morning at 8.30 a.m.” instead of “The committee **meets** on Thursday morning at 8.30 a.m “. (An email about a business event)
2. Sentence fragments errors.
- “Are free on Saturday”? instead of “Are **you** free on Saturday?”
 - ‘You fancy a picnic’? Instead of “**Do** you fancy a picnic”? (Messaging to make plans)
3. Missing comma after introductory element.
- “In case you haven’t noticed my real name doesn’t appear in the article” instead of “In case you haven’t noticed, my real name doesn’t appear in the article.”
 - “In case you decide to join the meeting the schedule is attached in this email instead of “In case you decide to join the meeting, the schedule is attached in this email. (An email about a business event.)
4. Misusing the apostrophe with “its” .
- “**Its** our pleasure to invite you” instead of **It’s** our pleasure to invite you” (Messaging to make plans)
5. Misplaced Modifier.
- Let’s enjoy this cold wonderful night’ instead of “Let’s enjoy this wonderful cold night” (Messaging to make plans)
 - How about giving her white fashionable jeans? Instead of “How about giving her fashionable white jeans (Messaging to make plans)
6. Confusing word families. So using one part of speech instead of the other.
- “I was (5)... particular interested in the digital marketing” instead of “I was (5)... **particularly** interested in the digital marketing”.
 - Actually, talk to all of you, is the best way to reach a negotiation” instead of “**Actually talking** to all of you, is the best way to reach a negotiation. (An email about a business event)
7. Vague pronoun reference:
- “When he finally found his colleague, he was so happy”. (he or colleague? instead it should be used in this way: ‘He was so happy when he finally found his colleague”.
8. Lack of parallel structures.
- “I am attaching a detailed report about the new digital marketing plan and information on new market presentation” instead of” I am attaching a detailed report about the new digital marketing plan and information on new **marketing** presentation” (An email about a business event)
9. Split infinitives:
- “Would you like to **immediately** join us in the café”? Instead of “Would you like to join us **immediately** in the café”?
10. Commonly confused words.
- Did you make up your mind? Yes I **except**, instead of “Yes I **accept**” (messaging to make plans)
 - I am **quiet** sure. Instead of “I am **quite** sure.

- *Their are coming* instead of ***They're coming***

- ***Than***, *you are pleased to be part of our meeting* instead of ***Then***, *you are pleased to be part of our meeting.*

Many students' errors are encountered even in writing style:

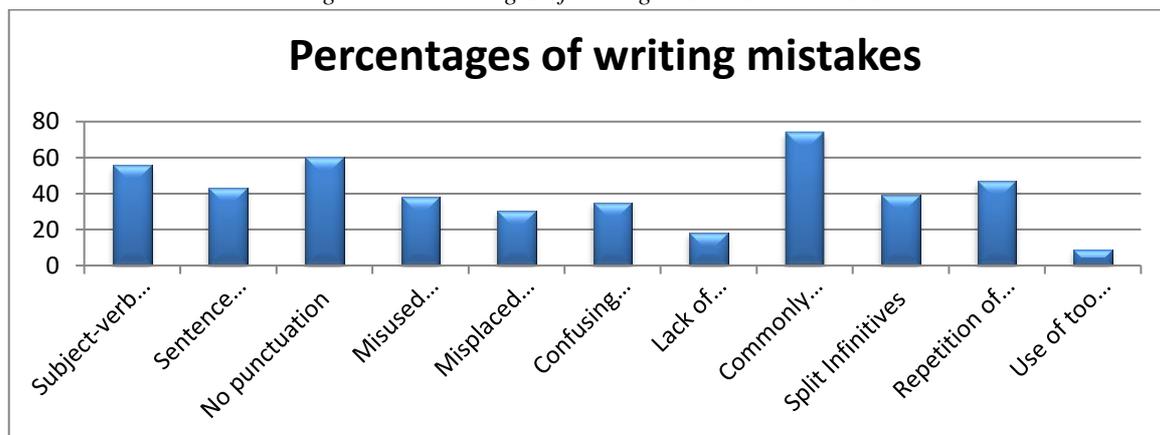
11. The repetition of the same word or sets of words, which too often gives writing an immature style.¹³

- *"I am free this afternoon. I'd love to go out together this afternoon"* instead of *"I am free and I'd love to go out together this afternoon (Messaging to make plans)*

12. The use of too many passive sentences. Using too many passive sentences ¹⁴makes writing slow and uninteresting. Only their appropriate use can make writing more powerful this is obvious in many checked emails of the students.

Taking into consideration the assessed tasks appointed to the students from the materials in section 4.1.1, the graph below presents all the kinds of writing mistakes in the students' tasks and which of them have the highest percentage, based on the evaluated writing tasks. In this way, Albanian teachers become aware where to focus more in explaining written works, in order to minimize these mistakes and to improve students' writing skills. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Percentages of writing mistakes in the tasks



As it is clearly seen from the graph the highest percentage in the writing mistakes from the students' assessed tasks, have "commonly confused words" with 74%, "missing commas sentences" with 60%, which lead to confusing ideas, "Subject-verb agreement errors" with 56%, "repetition of the same word or sets of words" with 47,8% and "split infinitives" inside a sentence as well, with 39%.

4.1.3. How do the written tasks lead to an efficient communication in Writing?

All the materials in this subject, help students in this professional study program in this way:

¹³ The official guide to the new TOEFL iBT, educational testing services (2006), pp.321

¹⁴ The official guide to the new TOEFL iBT, educational testing services (2006), pp.322

- In their future job, they need to publish in blogs, magazines, posters. Respective vocabulary is taught and practiced.
- Students are encouraged to write with a certain aim and for a target reader, for example in writing an expression of interest, an application form to an employee, an email cover letter, messages to make or cancel plans, to colleagues etc.
- The practiced writing tasks and topics taught are challenging which correspond to the learning goals and integrate different skills
- The tasks are relevant and realistic.
- The students' contents of the work are corrected, by adding comments to their homework or in dialogues through e-mail, messages, instructions, problems' explanations, expression of interest, or conversations among colleagues.
- Help writing with reading exercises. It's a great support, as it helps learners understand that good writing is an important communication tool.
- Sentences have to be limited to a single idea, and they have to be kept short and well-constructed.
- Students are taught that to improve the clarity of their writing is by paying more attention to the use of tenses and also to pay attention to the sentence fragments which may be confusing to readers because it often makes the meaning of their words unclear.

5. Conclusions

As a conclusion, it is highly important to teach students how to think critically and organize their ideas appropriately in Written English.

Based on this study and assessment of both tasks, it has to be noted that writing skills need to be improved, in order to make writing English more suitable and adapted to the students' field of study. In order to avoid the errors in writing, there is needed a clear understanding of the instructions and tips, given during the explanations of the topics, continuous practice and putting in evidence all the repeated errors. Knowing the highest percentage of writing mistakes in the appointed tasks, teachers become aware where to focus more in explaining written works, in order to minimize these mistakes and to improve students' writing skills.

In spite of the taught instructions, students still face difficulties in the acquisition of: subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, punctuation marks, pronoun references, confusing word families, or even the repetition of the same word or sets of words, which often gives writing an immature style.

Writing needs to be integrated with other skills, in order to be more interesting and attractive. and to be based on the students' needs and interests.

In order to have good results in an effective communication in writing, it's important to explain writing to students, the way how to write, the reason why to write and for who to write, and about the difficulties they may face through writing process. They have to be instructed that writing is a tiring process and involves a lot of time for reflection. All these make learners more motivated and more confident.

Summing up, developing good writing strategies in higher education, depends also on reading. The student needs to use the right reading strategies and must get the meaning from the text, so that to focus on key points, and make the necessary generalizations by describing them accurately. This help students on understanding and separating important from unimportant facts and generalize and reorganize the given information.

More writing needs to be done with students in all the courses. Because all of us are readers and we do not need to neglect its communicative function in classes.

Students learn to express themselves in writing by writing in the communication level.

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