

ASSESSING THE NECESSITY OF ESTABLISHING ACADEMIC WRITING CENTERS IN ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

ASSISTANT LECTURER OLESIA LUPU, PH.D.
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration
Al. I. Cuza University
22, Carol I Boulevard, Iasi
o_lupu@uaic.ro

LECTURER ȘTEFANIA PANAITESCU, MA, PHD CANDIDATE
Faculty of Economic Sciences, + 40-259-408798,
3-5, Armatei Române street, Oradea
spanaitescu@uoradea.ro

Abstract

The need for Academic Writing Centres is more and more felt in Romanian universities especially as these have undergone the process of aligning to all the European educational requirements. New under-graduate and graduate programmes have been established and for many the language of instruction is English. Consequently, students feel the need for well-structured modules on academic writing in English as an additional educational tool for their research and writing assignments. The paper discusses students needs for EAP training at two Romanian universities: the Faculty of Economic Sciences in Oradea and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iasi.

This paper looks at modalities to meet students' needs concerning academic writing tasks at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the University Al. I. Cuza of Iasi.

At the Faculty of Economics of Oradea this academic year has seen the start of MA programmes in English and *Business English* is a subject on the core curriculum, being taught during five semesters to under-graduate students majoring in as many as six speciality areas. Starting with 1994, a new MA programme taught in English has been launched at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iasi and Business English is compulsory at the undergraduate level. Undergraduate students take five semesters of English language. All undergraduate students have to take four compulsory semesters of Business English at the Al. I. Cuza University in Iasi. Students in International Relations take additional four semesters where a whole year is spent on Business Writing. Unfortunately, no language training is provided at the graduate and post-graduate levels.

One of the first initiatives to establish an *Academic Study Center* has been discussed at the University of Oradea. The center will function not only as a research tool but also as a provider of EAP training. The paper will focus on the general context of the EAP training in Romania.

The general context of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Romania is that of discovery and not continuation of a tradition. Due to a general shift in pedagogy, from traditional to more task-based approach, students needs have been re-assessed and an attempt to somehow balance academic and professional skills has been made. As the Romanian educational system has opened up and more and more students have had the opportunity to study at least one semester within western universities, a new standard of learning and teaching has been brought back to Romania both by students and professors. However, EAP courses have not yet gained a definite position in the

academic curricula at the tertiary-level education. At the same time, many ESP courses and seminars contain EAP training. How much time is allotted to EAP training depends pretty much on the lecturer. As a general rule, most Romanian lecturers and instructors are not aware of EAP specific pedagogy.

As a rule, pre-service students take General English in their first year and, at least, two semesters of Business English in their second year. Starting with the early 90s, there has been a shift towards task-based teaching and active learning. Thus, a communicative approach has been used extensively. This led to teaching which focused more on speaking, as it was extremely appealing to students which were anxious to get away from traditional theme-based textbooks with almost no emphasis on communication.

In the late 90s, many students were required to take standard international exams, such as TOEFL, IELTS, CAE, BEC, GMAT, which were all in English. Now students were faced with exams which assessed not only communication skills but also *writing and reading skills*. Traditionally, reading exercises contained a text and questions. Students were rarely asked to reflect on their reading and interpret their reading. Furthermore, the texts and themes were not very challenging leading to mechanical reading of texts. Now, with new approaches came also newly designed textbooks which brought different reading assignments: pre-reading activities (pre-questions, discussion points, etc), skimming and scanning, reflecting upon their reading and more importantly, contextualizing. As academic training required not only reading academic texts but also writing assignments, various writing activities were designed by teachers to teach writing skills: summarising, paraphrasing, note-taking, etc. Initially, writing activities focused more on writing for professional purposes: writing CVs, cover letters, proposals, etc. Thus, textbooks started providing information on layout, style, tone, formal language, etc.

Students were open to learning very practical writing skills as they were instrumental in getting better chances on the labour market. For example, a textbook designed with the support of the British Council EBA – *English for Business and Administration*, published in 1991, contained CVs and students were asked, first, to analyze critically strong and weak points of a CV and then asked to write their own CV, following a model. Furthermore, other types of written documents were presented, such as memos and then tasks were designed as to engage students in producing their own writing.

As part of the curricula, teachers started requiring writing essays or summaries of articles. It is well known that Business Schools all over the world are the ones which assimilate quickly innovative pedagogy appropriate for such a dynamic field. Some of the disciplines at the tertiary level have started using collaborative pedagogy and interdisciplinary approaches. This also has had an effect on how academic writing was taught. Students were no longer asked to work individually, they were encouraged to write essays together with their peers or assigned short writing tasks during seminars as pair-work or group-work. More recently, teachers started spending more time not only on reflective writing but also argumentative writing which generally requires more preparation. Some students are taught in high-schools essay writing, others learn basic elements of essay writing at the university. As a part of the seminar activities dedicated to writing, students are taught elements of referencing and how ideas could be linked together. Collaborative writing has gained more significance as business students are more interested in gaining collaborative writing skills as businesses generally work in teams or under project format. So, many seminars are spent on writing assignments which could be later used by students in project writing. There are also training seminars on writing projects in English offered whether within universities or by private associations or NGOs.

Academic Writing as a subject is not currently taught as a discipline in Romanian universities, even if educators have tried to introduce it into the curricula. Nevertheless, many courses contain elements of academic writing and there is a strong interest towards academic writing at the post-graduate and doctoral level.

Academic Study Centers could definitely provide both self-study opportunities and guided training and instruction. Moreover, instructors will be trained to acquire necessary competencies in the field of EAP. Such centers will definitely bring together academics who are interested in interdisciplinary research and do it on their own. Romanian universities need to become more open towards alternative study centers and more inter-disciplinary approaches.

Bibliography

1. Björk, L. - Academic Writing : a University Writing Course, Studentlitteratur, Lund, Sweden, 2003
2. Byleen, E. - Developing Skills for academic writing, Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1998
3. Cavusgil, S. L. - Introduction to academic writing, Heinle & Heinle, 1998
4. Keane, R., Mark Downes (ed.) – Academic Writing. Civic Education Project and Belgrade Open School, Belgrade, 2003
5. Swales, J. M. - Academic Writing for Graduate Student: a Course for Non-native Speakers of English, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1994