

Students of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra as Object of the Research Results in Developing Foreign Language Writing Skills

Študenti Slovenskej poľnohospodárskej univerzity v Nitre ako objekt skúmania výsledkov zdokonaľovania cudzojazyčného písomného prejavu

Ľubomíra MORAVCOVÁ* and Ľudmila MAĎAROVÁ

Department of Languages, Faculty of Management and Economics, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, Tr. A. Hlinku 2, 949 76 Nitra, Slovakia. Tel.: +421376414547, e-mail: lubomira.moravcova@uniag.sk

*correspondence

Abstract

Writing in the foreign language is one of the most important language skills students develop and improve at the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra. Strong writing skills are essential to their future success, whether they are related to writing general reports on agricultural issues at home or in the world as well as to working-out some research papers aimed at agriculture, but also at some other areas of the business world. We have to state that writing is perhaps one of the most difficult skills students can develop and improve at our University. They learn how to write effectively, they are encouraged to develop an awareness of themselves as students - writers and essay authors. This paper deals with the essay writing analysis in teaching foreign languages at the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra, particularly from the point of their final results. The research was carried out in the Department of Languages and we present in our paper the results students achieved in writing essays in the two compared years, 2007 and 2010.

Key Words: agricultural issue, essay, evaluation, motivation, writing skills

Abstrakt

Písanie v cudzom jazyku je jednou z najdôležitejších jazykových zručností, v ktorej sa študenti Slovenskej poľnohospodárskej univerzity v Nitre neustále zdokonaľujú. Dobré zručnosti písania sú podstatné pre ich budúce úspechy, či sa už budú týkať písania všeobecných správ o poľnohospodárskych problematikách doma aj vo svete, alebo vypracovania rôznych výskumných správ zameraných na poľnohospodárstvo, ale aj na

iné oblasti podnikateľského sveta. Môžeme konštatovať, že písanie v cudzom jazyku je pravdepodobne jednou z najťažších zručností, ktorú si študenti na vysokej škole rozvíjajú. Učia sa, ako písať efektívne, sú motivovaní k rozvíjaniu svojej osobnosti – študenta pisateľa a autora písomného prejavu, eseje. Článok sa zaoberá analýzou hodnotenia písania esejí na výučbe cudzích jazykov na Slovenskej poľnohospodárskej univerzite v Nitre hlavne z pohľadu ich finálnych výsledkov. Výskum sme realizovali na Katedre jazykov a v publikácii prezentujeme výsledky, ktoré študenti dosiahli pri písaní esejí počas dvoch analyzovaných rokov – 2007 a 2010.

Kľúčové slová: poľnohospodárska problematika, esej, hodnotenie, motivácia, zručnosť písať

Podrobný abstrakt

Písanie sa všeobecne chápe ako jazyková zručnosť náročná pre väčšinu ľudí, tak v materinskom ako aj cudzom jazyku. Prečo je písomná komunikácia ťažšia v porovnaní s verbálnou? Podľa Byrna (1990) je reč prirodzený a normálny komunikačný prostriedok a pri používaní jazyka sme zvyknutí na fyzickú prítomnosť osoby a tiež na jej určitý feedback. Písanie, na druhej strane, je výlučne samostatná činnosť a fakt, že sa od nás vyžaduje písať samostatne bez možnosti interakcie, resp. podpory feedbackom, robí samotný akt písania veľmi ťažký. Navyše pri rozprávaní vieme, s kým hovoríme, pri písaní nám náš čitateľ nemusí byť vždy nevyhnutne známy. Pisateľ si vytvára svoj vlastný kontext, môže sa len pokúšať predstaviť si čitateľove reakcie a zakomponovať ich do textu, keďže okamžitý feedback nie je možný. Vety musia byť správne konštruované, spájané a organizované za účelom tvorby textu. Písanie si tiež vyžaduje znalosti z oblasti stavby vety, kapitalizácie, interpunkcie a zdôrazňovania významu. Ide o proces zakódovania informácie pisateľom, t.j. transformovanie myšlienok do jazyka a jej dekodovanie čitateľom, čiže interpretáciu tejto správy. Problémy, ktoré môžu vzniknúť pri písaní sa dajú všeobecne rozdeliť na psychologické, lingvistické a kognitívne.

Pomenovanie „esej“ po prvýkrát použil francúzsky autor Michel de Montaigne (Essais. Online 1.11.2013), ktorý v roku 1580 nazval svoju knihu úvah o živote slovom „Essais“.

Esej (z angl. essay < fr. essai = skúška, literárny pokus < lat. exagium = váženie) je žáner náučnej literatúry, úvaha, v ktorej sa neobyčajným spôsobom spracúva odborná, najmä kultúrna problematika. Zaujímavo, príťažlivo, esteticky, vtipne a vecne chce presvedčiť alebo poučiť čitateľa (Essay definition. Online 1.11.2013).

Essej je úvaha dlhá niekoľko paragrafov. Pojednáva o jednej problematike a je dostatočne zložitá nato, aby bola diskutovaná v jednom paragrafe. Preto téma musí byť rozdelená do niekoľkých paragrafov, jeden pre každú hlavnú myšlienku. Potom je potrebné spojiť jednotlivé paragrafy dohromady pridaním úvodu a záveru. (Oshima – Hogue, 1999).

Lewitt (1990) uvádza, že väčšina študentov má averziu voči písaniu v cudzom jazyku. Mnohí študenti často dosiahnu univerzitnú úroveň bez akýchkoľvek skúseností s písaním kompozície. Samozrejme, už robili nejaké písomné preklady izolovaných viet a paragrafov, niekedy z rodného do cieľového jazyka, niekedy to bolo naopak. Dôraz

však zostáva na tzv. správnosti názorov študentov vyjadrených písomnou formou, ktorý je buď podceňovaný alebo ignorovaný.

Ožarska (2008) poukazuje na skutočnosť, že učiť sa písať v akademickom kontexte v cudzom jazyku je pre študentov veľmi náročná úloha, pretože zvládnutie písomného štýlu si vyžaduje správne pochopenie logiky akademického textu, jeho štruktúry a formálnej slovnej zásoby. Znamená to vedieť narábať s časovo náročnými procesmi náčrtov a kontroly pri súčasnej potrebe čeliť časovému termínu tvorby a prijateľnej finálnej verzii kompozície.

Podľa Osterovej (1991) musia študenti pochopiť, že pod písaním kompozície - eseje myslíme na niečo oveľa širšie, na niečo oveľa dôležitejšie než len na správne slová a vety, viac než len na správne štrukturovaný paragraf, dokonca viac než len na perfektne napísanú stranu textu. Očakáva sa, že pisateľ má čo vyjadriť. Očakáva sa, že čitateľ mu bude môcť porozumieť. Akademický svet vyžaduje od písania, aby bolo inteligentné, logické a dobre organizované.

Introduction

Language is considered a social phenomenon. As it was being formed under certain conditions and needs of social life, it is dependent on the society using it, which means that it has connection with a particular language community, with its culture. If we perceive the mankind as a complex of the organized social units, it is obvious that it cannot do without certain means of control and intercommunication. Language became the medium of information exchange among the individuals, the basic element for thinking of each of us. It forms, together with thinking, a dialectical unity. It doesn't exist in isolation – on its own, it is inseparably connected with the process of thinking. The language is also a certain kind of the man's internal communication means. It provides thinking with a certain shape and brings its results (Zelenická, 2012).

We have recently recorded the impact of other languages on lexis - a lot of foreign words on the one hand as well as a lot of abbreviations, which often come from the English or French languages. We shouldn't forget about the fact that each language is lively, it is permanently being developed, and that languages are inter-blended into other languages. The way people often meet in one place, the languages do it in the same way (Ludwiczak, 2011).

Writing about the given composition topics belongs to the least favourite activities of many students, especially if they are supposed to write in a foreign language. Besides the fact that students are forced to express their own thoughts in the written form, attention has to be paid to mistake-free spelling, choice of appropriate lexical units, as well as to correct sentence stylization in order to develop the skills necessary for their specific, coherent, and readable essays.

The ability to express one's ideas in the foreign or second language in writing, the ability to do so with reasonable accuracy and coherence, is a great achievement. There are many native speakers of English or German languages who don't really master this skill. Teaching essay writing at any level of the language proficiency is a very demanding

process. In colleges, as it was mentioned before, it belongs to the least loved activities of most students.

How to begin writing a composition – an essay? We have to start by thinking. This technique is generally known as "brainstorming" and it is very important, at this introductory stage, to generate and gather as many ideas as possible about the topic we have to write about. We can then continue with noting them down, or at least by talking to ourselves (intrapersonal communication) and then putting our ideas down. We have to record our ideas and thoughts, which naturally will lead to production of some new ones. At the end of this first phase we can have plenty of material for our given topics.

According to Gebhardt – Rodrigues (1989), to generate means to spark ideas, to trigger insights, to activate thought processes – to somehow muster the information and insights you need for a writing project. The need to generate ideas can surface at any time while you are writing, drafting, revising, or editing. By gathering the information you need before drafting, you give yourself an opportunity to get a head start on your writing project. With the content of your paper under control, you can focus on other matters while you draft. After you have generated sufficient ideas and details about your topic, try to sharpen the focus of your topic into a main idea – a thesis statement – that will control and unify the whole paper.

Since the paragraph develops only one idea, the topics being developed are necessarily quite limited. It is necessary to write an essay. Unlike the paragraph, the essay is a more formal composition. Each paragraph in an essay has a designated function: introduction, developmental paragraphs, and conclusion. How many paragraphs an essay contains depends entirely on the complexity of the topic. Some essays have only two or three paragraphs, whereas others may have twenty or thirty. English courses contain from four to six paragraphs: one introductory paragraph, three developmental paragraphs, and one concluding paragraph. The essay, like the paragraph, is controlled by one central idea. In the essay, the sentence containing the central idea is called *the thesis statement*. The thesis statement is similar to the topic sentence (in a paragraph). It contains an expression of an attitude, opinion, or idea about a topic; unlike the topic sentence, however, the thesis statement is broader and expresses the controlling idea for the entire essay. In fact, each of the developmental paragraphs should have a controlling idea that echoes or relates to the controlling idea - the central idea - in the thesis statement. The thesis statement should be expressed in a complete sentence (Smalley – Ruetten, 1990).

The use of some special expressions, phraseologisms and stylistically more complicated sentences increases the value of composition. It is important to think over the core of the composition as well as its correct structure, to develop the thoughts, not to digress from the topic, to keep the scope of the topic, which is usually 200 – 250 words. Michelčíková (2012) perceives the composition as one of the productive word building procedures, which helps the language word inventory to get broader.

Oshima – Hogue, (1999) claim the final paragraph in an essay is the conclusion, which tells the reader that we have completed an essay. First, we write a summary of the main points discussed in the body of the essay or rewrite the thesis statement in different

words. Then we add our final comments on the subject – food for thought. They recommend to take this opportunity to make a strong, effective message that the reader will remember. The concluding paragraph consists of a summary of the main points, or a restatement of our thesis in different words and of our final comment on the subject, based on the information we have provided.

It is important to stress that writing compositions plays an important role in teaching foreign languages at the University. It is considered a beginning procedure for students to be able to master the writing skill, to learn to write in order to be able to present their future scientific papers. It is a certain way how to acquire the academic writing skill.

Material and Methods

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the written skills of the students of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra from the English and German languages and on the basis of the final results achieved from writing essays to compare the level of knowledge in the stated years - 2007 and 2010. We accepted the hypothesis that foreign language competences of the University students can get better through improvement and modernisation of education as well as through various mobility studies abroad.

Our research was carried out on the sample of 799 students. We compared the achieved essay results in the two groups. The first group comprising 473 students wrote the essay in the year 2007 and the second group comprising 326 student in the year 2010 (Moravcová, 2012). The acquired data were statistically processed and presented in the tables and a figure. The basic indices were used for the data analysis, where the year 2007 was considered the basic one and the year 2010 was compared with it. The essential descriptive characteristics were calculated – the arithmetic average and the standard deviation.

Results and Discussion

Political and economic changes of the last years have revealed the possibilities for free travelling, study stays, and working opportunities abroad, which enormously increased the interest in studying foreign languages. We have monitored on the sample of 799 students how the improved level of education and the increased number of foreign language classes were manifested on the written skills of the students of the Slovak Agricultural University. We compared the essay writing results from the English and German languages in the stated years 2007 and 2010. 473 students were writing essays in the year 2007 and in the year 2010 this number was 326 students (Table 1, 2).

Table 1: The Essay Writing Evaluation. Number of Students in the Year 2007

Evaluation	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	4	Total Amount of Students
Year-2007	35	30	85	61	147	115	473

Table 2: The Essay Writing Evaluation. Number of Students in the Year 2010

Evaluation	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	4	Total Amount of Students
Year-2010	30	34	67	52	95	48	326

The achieved results were subsequently statistically evaluated (Table 3). We have found out the following essay writing results from the English and German languages: In the year 2007, the average was 2.76 – plus, minus 0.91 and in the year 2010 the average was 2.52 – plus, minus 0.88, which proves that the essay writing skill got improved in the year 2010.

Table 3: Average Evaluation of the Essay Writing Results in the Years 2007 and 2010

Year 2007	Average Evaluation	2.76
	Dispersion	0.83
	Standard Deviation	0.91
Year 2010	Average Evaluation	2.52
	Dispersion	0.77
	Standard Deviation	0.88

It is evident from comparing both years that in the year 2010, compared to 2007, there were more students (by 24.4 %) evaluated with the grade A – 1 and even 64.4 % with the grade B – 1.5. The number of students evaluated with the grade FX – 4 dropped by 39.4 % in the year 2010 in comparison to the year 2007 (Table 4, Figure 1).

Table 4: Comparison of the Evaluated Results in the Years 2007 and 2010

Evaluation	% - Year 2007	% - Year 2010	Increase/decrease in % (2010 to 2007)
1	7.40	9.20	24.4
1.5	6.34	10.43	64.4
2	17.97	20.55	14.4
2.5	12.90	15.95	23.7
3	31.08	29.14	-6.2
4	24.31	14.72	-39.4
Total	100.00	100.00	

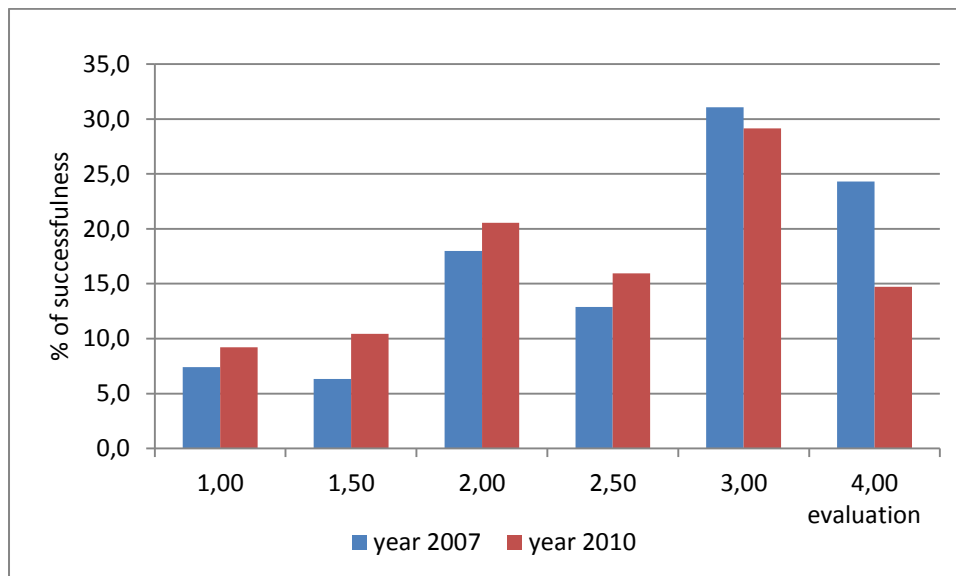


Figure 1: Comparison of the Evaluated Results in the Years 2007 and 2010

Based on the acquired skills, our hypothesis that students' knowledge and skills are being improved and that students entering the university are better prepared for the study of English has been confirmed. Improvement of the knowledge level is evidently reflected in the lexis and stylization, which is a picture of the increased interest in mastering the foreign languages not only from the viewpoint of the society, but of the students themselves. At present, there is a permanently actual theme regarding the Amendment to the Education Act (Jurzyca, 2010), which introduced English as a compulsory foreign language since 1st September, 2011. In accordance with it, each graduate from the high school should be able to speak English fluently. Besides this, he/she should be able to speak one more foreign language. The task of colleges and universities is to further develop foreign language competences while taking account of the professional aiming and in this way to create better conditions to university graduates in terms of their placement on the job market.

Conclusion

Education of the capable foreign language experts in the field of agriculture is one of the major priorities of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra. We have found out from the research of the students' writing results that better prepared students are entering the university, which has resulted in the increasing requirements that have to be put on the foreign language education in the near future. We can see the vision related to foreign language education at colleges and universities exclusively in the specific language orientation and academic writing. The writing skill is a certain reflexion of the society culture as well as of a personality character.

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