

The importance of writing skills at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences: Students' perspective

Zrinka Friganović Sain¹, Viktor Vojnić²

¹ M.Sc., RIT Croatia, Don Frana Bulića 6, Dubrovnik, Hrvatska; zrinka.friganovic-sain@croatia.rit.edu

² mag. educ. phil. et philol. angl.; Istarsko veleučilište, Riva 6, Pula, Hrvatska, vojnic@iv.hr

Abstract

The English language is present in every aspect of education, be it for humanities or for natural sciences. There are many articles and books published only in English which serve as a basis for many university courses in many languages. Even those courses which are primarily focused on practical work such as engineering, automation, and computer aided design rely heavily on the use of English language for their sources. This is the reason why teaching English is required in almost every field of education. In this article, we are going to discuss the students' perspective on learning English as a foreign language, specifically writing. First, we are going to explain why teaching writing to students from different fields and with different backgrounds may be problematic. The research uses a questionnaire to disclose what types of assistance in writing the students at Istrian University of Applied Sciences perceive they need in their academic endeavors. The results provide relevant data to instructors to better assist students in writing and in approaching teaching English in professional studies. The authors also discuss whether the existence of a writing center similar to writing centers at American institutions of higher education could be appropriate.

Keywords: writing skills, technical communication, writing lab center, professional writing

1. Introduction

1.1. Teaching non-language oriented students

Teaching English as a foreign language has been a much debated topic for as long as the English language has served as a lingua franca throughout the world. The English language is present in every aspect of higher education, be it for humanities or

for natural sciences. There are many articles and books published only in English which serve as a basis for many university courses in many languages. Even those courses which are primarily focused on practical work such as engineering, automation, and computer aided design rely heavily on the use of English language for their sources. This is the reason why teaching English is required in almost every field of education. In this article, the authors will discuss the students' perspective on

learning English as a foreign language and, most specifically, learning how to write in English for academic and business purposes. Firstly, the authors will attempt to explain why teaching writing in a foreign language to students from different fields and with different backgrounds may be problematic. Using a questionnaire, in the research conducted we have collected data which will disclose the types of assistance the students believe they need in writing. The results obtained will not only help identify the students' needs but will also reveal possible improvements in teaching writing in English to students enrolled in professional fields of study. We will also discuss whether any additional assistance in writing for students at institutions of higher education should be organized in the form of a writing center, similar to those from American universities such as RIT Croatia.

Naturally, the problem with writing is quite common with all students of English as a second language, and this problem surely becomes more evident when the primary choice of students is not English language and literature. There are countless of different approaches to teaching English, and one must find a certain balance when choosing which approach to use in their class; a balance between the students' needs, their interests, as well as their previous experiences with the English language need to be combined with the need to understand the subject matter and the course material in a foreign language.

The need to recognize and respect all the previously mentioned categories serves as a basis for creating the curricula for English language courses at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences. Since the students are being taught and trained to be ready to face the labor market as soon as they finish their studies, English language courses also need to be delivered in a more applicable and business oriented way. Students thus should be primarily focused on learning business communication, improving the vocabulary from the students' particular fields of education, developing interpersonal skills, speech, as well as writing skills. The need to develop writing skills, as one of the more important aspects of education, has already been commented on by Zrinka Friganović Sain (2022):

Among the benefits of having strong writing skills at work are the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with colleagues and clients, the ability to appear professional in emails and other written documents, and the ability to ensure quality in external or client focused presentations and materials. Business professionals must pay attention to style, tone, clarity, and logic, as well as to avoid poor word choice and poor grammar, which is considered as extremely rude and disrespectful in a professional environment. Therefore, irrespective of their field of study, students need to become more aware of the need to improve their writing skills, and this need should be embedded in their education. (Friganović Sain, 2022)

It is safe to assume that having strong writing skills would be beneficial in a working environment. It remains to be noted that students will not become excellent communicators only by learning to write properly in any language. Thus, the question remains, how does one approach teaching communication and professional appearance. This is especially true for students whose primary focus is not learning English. Students in other fields are often of the opinion that English courses they enroll are simply just general education courses they are obliged to take in order to earn ECTS credits and get their degree. They often need reminding that English is all around them every day, and that if they choose to pursue their careers in whichever field they are, they are very likely to find themselves in many business situations where their knowledge of English, and especially their writing skills, will ultimately decide their success. Because of this, one should find the right approach to teach style, tone, clarity, logic, word choice, grammar, etc. in a course for non-language-oriented students and do so by focusing on situations and topics familiar to students depending on their field, so as to show the importance of the aforementioned. Even though the quote above states that this awareness should be raised irrespective of the field of study, it is important to find the middle ground and adjust to the students' needs by connecting to their field of study for better understanding.

1.2. Writing centers: purpose and methods

The institutions of higher education in the United States approach this problem offering institutionalized help to students in writing in the format of writing centers. Violeta Molina-Natera (2017) states that the creation of writing centers in the U.S. has been widely standardized or institutionalized. This is due to the fact that during the 19th century, especially towards its end, with the broadening of education, students were less prepared in terms of literacy because they started to enroll in universities immediately from public schools, as opposed to enrolling from private schools. Writing centers were created to improve the students' literacy levels, but the research shows that they have since evolved to assist any student in need of help with their writing skills.

When discussing writing centers and their purpose, one of the most prominent American authors and proponents of writing centers, Stephen North states the following in one of the most influential essays concerning this topic: "In a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (North, 1984, p. 438). This statement sends a clear message on the importance of writing centers, but when discussed within the parameters of non-language-oriented students, similar issues may occur. It is unclear if improving the students' writing skills makes them better writers if they fail to internalize the importance of writing in their fields of study. Focusing on improving the style, tone, clarity, etc. of the writing may not be enough to improve the professional appearance and clarity of the writer if their field of study does not serve as a source and base of this approach, or if the students lack the ability of critical analysis of the content matter in the language. Thus, instead of a sort of universal approach, one should tackle teaching writing by showing the students the importance of writing skills in their particular fields of study.

However, as mentioned above, making learning English language and writing skills equally important to students of mechatronics as learning other specific knowledge and skills related to their professional field of study seems to pose problems.

This is why this article focuses on the students' perspective on using professional English language in writing, as well as their own opinions on whether they need assistance in the learning of such a skill. The aim of this research is to examine whether a writing center/program (such as the one at RIT) is appropriate to best meet the needs of the students of professional studies such as the Undergraduate professional study of Mechatronics or the Specialist Graduate Study: Creative Management in Processes at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences. As explained by Friganović Sain, "The main goal of this initiative is not only to master a set of writing conventions but also to gain more comprehensive understanding of subject knowledge." (Friganović Sain, 2022) which confirms the previous claims of approaching teaching and improvement of writing skills individually through the field of study of interested students. Thus, the purpose of our research is to contemplate the students' perspective on the importance of writing skills with regards to their study program, years of studying English, as well as their self-reported proficiency.

With this in mind, it is our belief that an institutionalized support in writing to students of the Istrian University of Applied Sciences, either in form of a writing center or a similar structure led by qualified staff, could be perceived as helpful in their academic endeavors as well as for their future careers. Further inquiry is needed to see how such a structure can be established and which aspects of writing skills (or communication skills in general) should be its focus.

1.3. Understanding students' perspective

In order to assess the students' perspective on improving their writing skills, one should also examine the students' perspective on communication skills as a whole. Writing is very prominent in the business world and while it is true that students should be prepared for writing and expressing themselves in a business environment, it is also important for them to fully comprehend the need to improve their overall communication skills in their native language and in English. However, the perspective of students may vary depending on their field of study, in that students of mechatronics may find business communication less of

an important aspect of their study, while focusing more on their more practical tasks. The authors of the study believe that students of professional studies such as the Undergraduate professional study of Mechatronics should understand the advantages of having good writing skills, as well as communication skills in general, in the job market, and not to take the route of getting by without improving their business communication skills or working around them. In fact, one of the Curriculum Outcomes of the Undergraduate Professional Study: Mechatronics at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences is "to apply the principles of business communication within the profession and to adapt to work in project teams" (Istrian University of Applied Sciences [IV], no date). Since many businesses today strive towards internationalization, this makes improving communication skills in English a crucial aspect of English related courses.

To examine the students' attitudes towards communication skills, research has been conducted by Iva Pavić (2019), a student at the Faculty of Economics at the University of Split, for her undergraduate thesis. In her research, the author surveyed her peers on the main thesis of her work, claiming that communication skills are crucial for business career development. The results show that the majority of respondents were in agreement with this claim. The author claims that the fact that the students' opinions on communication skills are important for the personal growth and development of an individual student, but also for the progress of future professionals in a business environment, having also provided an important insight into the perception of students. Even though the results show that most students regard the development of communication skills very highly, there still exists a need to raise awareness of the students even further and educate them about the importance of constant improvement of their communication skills, in order to create highly competitive graduates after entering the labor market and facing all the challenges in front of them (Pavić, 2019).

The research for this paper is primarily focused on writing skills of the students of the Istrian University of Applied Sciences, but further research could be conducted to see how students of English

in professional fields perceive the importance of communication skills in general and how they think improving them would impact their future successes. Such research could also confirm the previous claim that students of mechatronics find writing skills less of an important aspect for their future careers. Regardless of the possible results, the fact remains that writing is a complex skill, the teaching of which should not be taken lightly. As explained by Kristina Jurković (2020) in her graduate thesis, writing affects the development and outcome of thinking, and as such is an important ability of each individual. The author lists many strategies and techniques as a prerequisite for the mastery of writing, such as planning, drafting and text correction, claiming that in addition to cognitive factors, the quality of the written text also heavily relies on the metacognitive, psychomotor, contextual, and affective processes (Jurković, 2020). This only shows how complex the approach to teaching writing can be, and how difficult it would be to pinpoint the exact needs of Istrian University students. For this reason, we have chosen to narrow down some of the factors through our questionnaire as explained below.

Besides the already mentioned parameters, another important aspect of language learning should be taken into consideration when teaching and improving writing skills, the students' previous knowledge and proficiency. Research by Lovorka Zergollern-Miletić, Ph.D., shows that the expected Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels; A2 for primary school, and B1 for secondary school, are indeed attained by the students. The author also concludes that proficiency in writing is also affected by many different factors such as the length of English tuition, the intensity of tuition for secondary school students, learning other foreign languages, as well as the use of the Internet (Zergollern-Miletić, 2007).

The purpose of this research is to examine and define what the students at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences believe to be the most needed types of support in writing, discuss their attitudes towards the development of their writing skills, and to understand whether they would use the services of a writing center or a similar structure given the chance.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were all students (N = 40) studying at the Istrian University of Applied Sciences, enrolled in two study programs; the Undergraduate Professional Study of Mechatronics and the Specialist Graduate Study: Creative Management in Processes. Out of this sample, 35 students (87.5%) were male and 5 were female (12.5%). Twelve students (30%) were enrolled in Creative Management in Processes and 28 (70%) were enrolled in Mechatronics. Out of the total, 28 (70%) were undergraduate (11 Freshmen, 12 Sophomore and 5 Junior) and 12 (30%) were graduate students (10 Freshmen and 2 Sophomore). According to self-ratings of the students, 10 (25%) were beginners, 23 (57.5%) were at intermediate level, and 7 students (17.5%) were advanced learners.

2.2. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed on site in person to the students who were present at the time. All students consented to participate in the survey, their answers were completely anonymous and confidential and were used for research purposes only. This survey took approximately 4-5 minutes to complete.

2.3. Instruments

The survey distributed was a 19-item survey for assessing the type of help and/or assistance the participants believed they needed in writing. Socio-demographic measures include gender, grade level, proficiency, years of studying English, study program, and approximate GPA (Grade Point Average).

Proficiency level was assessed by 1-item self-report measure (1 = beginner, 2 = intermediate, 3 = advanced). There were 10 students who assessed themselves as beginners (1 student learning English for 1 year, 4 students learning for 8 to 12 years, 4 students learning for more than 12 years; 1 student did not provide the years of study). In the intermediate group (N = 23) there were 3 students learning English for 1 to 4 years, 12 students learning 8 to 12 years and 8 students learning English more than 12 years. An advanced group was comprised of 7 students, out of whom 2 were learning English for 8 to 12 years and 5 students were learning English for more than 12 years.

3. Results

Descriptive data are presented in Table 1. The results showed that most of the items were rated at average, with highest ratings for the items I want to improve my writing skills (90% of participants agree with the statement), Writing skills are important for my academic success (77.5% of participants agree with the statement), Writing skills are important for my professional career (80.0% of participants agree with the statement), Every institution of higher education should offer to their students organized and institutionalized support in writing (85.0% of participants agree with the statement), and I am interested to get help in writing and text editing in English at my institution of higher education (65.0% of participants agree with the statement). Only two items were rated well below the average, i.e., the item I believe I need some help with understanding assigned readings (15.0% of participants agree with the statement) and the item I believe I need some help with understanding assignment instructions (12.5% of participants agree with the statement).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the whole sample:

Item	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	M	SD
1. I believe I need some help with basic grammar in my writing.	45.0%	12.5%	42.5%	2.97	1.29
2. I believe I need some help with sentence structure and punctuation.	42.5%	17.5%	40.0%	2.95	1.30
3. I believe I need some help with vocabulary and/or word-choice.	50.0%	12.5%	37.5%	2.75	1.24
4. I believe I need some help with planning, drafting and outlining.	40.0%	20.0%	40.0%	2.95	1.20
5. I believe I need some help with conducting research.	35.0%	25.0%	40.0%	3.08	1.14
6. I believe I need some help with formatting citations and integrating evidence and quotations.	52.5%	20.0%	27.5%	2.70	1.09
7. I believe I need some help with understanding assigned readings.	67.5%	17.5%	15.0%	2.15	1.25
8. I believe I need some help with understanding assignment instructions.	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	2.18	1.20
9. I believe I need some help with learning techniques for editing and self-proofreading.	45.0%	20.0%	35.0%	2.78	1.21
10. I believe I need some help with learning to write in a more formal and professional style.	26.0%	31.0%	44.0%	3.26	1.02
11. I want to get help with writing from the qualified personnel at my institution of higher education.	22.5%	30.0%	47.5%	3.28	1.01
12. I want to improve my writing skills.	5.0%	5.0%	90.0%	4.07	0.70
13. Writing skills are important for my academic success.	2.5%	20.0%	77.5%	3.98	0.73
14. Writing skills are important for my professional career.	7.5%	12.5%	80.0%	3.92	0.89
15. Every institution of higher education should offer to their students organized and institutionalized support in writing.	2.5%	12.5%	85.0%	4.07	0.69
16. I am interested to get help in writing and text editing in native language at my institution of higher education.	35.0%	25.0%	40.0%	3.00	1.11
17. I am interested to get help in writing and text editing in English at my institution of higher education.	20.0%	15.0%	65.0%	3.53	1.06
18. I am not familiar at the moment of the existence of any organized and institutionalized support in writing at my institution of higher education.	30.0%	40.0%	30.0%	3.00	0.88
19. I believe that I would be using such a support in writing regularly if it were available during my studies.	15.0%	42.5%	42.5%	3.30	0.94

Note. Participants rated items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), but some categories are suppressed for analysis and presentation purposes. For all items N=40, except for item 10, N=39.

The analyses of the differences between undergraduate and graduate students were done for all 19 items by means of Pearson chi-square tests. The comparison revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups in any of the items at $p > .05$. Thus, undergraduate and graduate students do not differ in their perceived need for help with writing skills, neither in their need to learn to write in a formal style, nor in their perception of the need for such help offered at the institution at which they are studying.

Further, we performed the analysis of the differences of the need for help with writing skills between students at different proficiency levels. The results showed that the differences were found in 5 out of 19 items (Table 2). All of the participants

who rated their proficiency level as advanced, disagree with the items I believe I need some help with basic grammar in my writing, I believe I need some help with planning, drafting and outlining, I believe I need some help with understanding assignment instructions, I believe I need some help with learning techniques for editing and self-proofreading, and 86% of them disagree with the item I believe I need some help with understanding assigned reading. The opposite is evident for the students who rated themselves as beginners. Most of them (70%) believe that they need some help with basic grammar. Also, most of them (60%) believe they need some help with planning, drafting and outlining, while 70% believe that they need some help with learning techniques for editing and self-proofreading.

Table 2. The comparison between students with different proficiency level in perceived need for help with academic writings:

Item		Proficiency			Chi ²	p
		Beginner (N=10)	Intermediate (N=23)	Advanced (N=7)		
1. I believe I need some help with basic grammar in my writing.	Disagree	30.0%	34.8%	100.0%	14.19	.007
	Not sure	0.0%	21.7%	0.0%		
	Agree	70.0%	43.5%	0.0%		
4. I believe I need some help with planning, drafting and outlining.	Disagree	0.0%	39.1%	100.0%	17.65	.001
	Not sure	40.0%	17.4%	0.0%		
	Agree	60.0%	43.5%	0.0%		
7. I believe I need some help with understanding assigned readings.	Disagree	30.0%	78.3%	85.7%	10.85	.028
	Not sure	30.0%	17.4%	0.0%		
	Agree	40.0%	4.3%	14.3%		
8. I believe I need some help with understanding assignment instructions.	Disagree	40.0%	82.6%	100.0%	11.87	.018
	Not sure	20.0%	13.0%	0.0%		
	Agree	40.0%	4.3%	0.0%		
9. I believe I need some help with learning techniques for editing and self-proofreading.	Disagree	10.0%	43.5%	100.0%	15.35	.004
	Not sure	20.0%	26.1%	0.0%		
	Agree	70.0%	30.4%	0.0%		

Note. Participants rated items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), but some categories are suppressed for analysis and presentation purposes. Only results for the items differing between students with different proficiency level are presented.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The goal of this paper was to study the perspective of the students of the Istrian University of Applied Sciences on the importance of writing skills and their perception on whether they need additional

assistance in improving their writing skills, and if so, what kind of assistance they would need. The focus of our research was to assess if students whose primary interests do not include English language are aware of the importance of writing

skills in English regardless of their fields of study, and if they are ready to further hone their skills.

To understand the students' general perspective on interpersonal skills, as well as the complexity of teaching writing, we addressed previous research by Pavić (2019) and Jurković (2020). Their research shows that students indeed find interpersonal skills crucial for their future careers, and that writing is imperative for their professional development. Our research confirmed that our students see the importance of constantly improving their writing skills, as well as that their perception on the relevance of writing in English for their future academic and professional success.

There were certain limitations to our research, such as a small sample of students and the objectivity of their self-assessment. Because of this, further research on this matter and similar topics is highly recommended.

However, we can conclude that it would be highly beneficial for our students to have access to a more institutionalized form of support which is specifically tailored to their needs and targets their professional study programs. This could take a form of a writing center where students can receive assistance for their specific work, as well as general guidelines to improve their writing skills.

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Sažetak

Engleski jezik prisutan je u svakom aspektu obrazovanja, bilo da se radi o humanističkim ili prirodnim znanostima. Mnogo je članaka i knjiga objavljenih samo na engleskom jeziku koji služe kao osnova za mnoge sveučilišne kolegije na mnogim jezicima. Čak i oni kolegiji koji su prvenstveno usmjereni na praktičan rad kao što su inženjering, automatizacija te konstruiranje primjenom računala uvelike se oslanjaju na korištenje engleskog jezika za svoje izvore. To je razlog što je podučavanje engleskog jezika potrebno u gotovo svim područjima obrazovanja. U ovom članku raspravljat ćemo o stavovima studenata o učenju engleskog kao stranog jezika, s naglaskom na pisanje. Prvo ćemo objasniti zašto podučavanje pisanja studentima iz različitih područja i s različitim pozadinama može biti problematično. Istraživanje koristi upitnik kako bi otkrilo koje vrste pomoći u pisanju studenti Istarskog Veleučilišta smatraju da su im potrebne u njihovim akademskim nastojanjima. Rezultati pružaju relevantne podatke instruktorima kako bi bolje pomogli studentima u pisanju i pristupu podučavanju engleskog jezika na stručnim studijima. Autori također raspravljaju o tome bi li bilo primjereno postojanje centra za pisanje sličnog centra za pisanje na američkim visokim učilištima.

Ključne riječi: vještine pisanja, tehnička komunikacija, centar za pisanje, stručno pisanje