

**ACADEMIC WRITING, THE INVISIBLE DIMENSION
OF THE CURRICULUM. THE EXPERIENCE
OF THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
VS U.S. UNIVERSITY PRACTICE**

Mihaela ARSENE¹

Abstract

In higher education, in Romania and elsewhere, writing is looked upon as a key learning tool and also a core assessment tool. If that is the case, is there a need for teaching academic writing to business students in Bucharest and do we offer students any models meant to develop their awareness of writing academic conventions or practices? Do undergraduate students pick up academic writing by sheer osmosis or does it need to be specifically taught? When, where and how to teach academic writing are some of the questions the paper will address, at the same time highlighting the practical solutions U.S. universities have developed to their students' benefit.

Keywords: academic writing, osmosis, genre analysis, remedial options

1. Teaching Academic Writing: here and there

The theme of this paper became unbearably urgent in summer 2015 when I was part of the graduation committee for over 70 students in the School of International Business and Economics within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The graduation committee convened for three days from dawn to dusk to attend the graduating students' presentations of their graduation papers. I checked with the other members of the graduation committee who had actually acted as supervisors of all the papers presented about the writing training available to the students. They all confirmed that the curriculum did not allow for any specific academic writing teaching; however, most of them mentioned that, in the early stages of the students' writing process, they had specifically emailed the students various links to websites with extensive information on academic writing, .pdf files to the same effect, and other support materials, so as to help the students become aware of the conventions and practices associated with writing for business purposes in an academic environment.

¹ Mihaela Arsene, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, Mihaela.Arsene@edmerica.ro

The conclusion which grew upon me – and which I shared with the modern languages and business communication department I am part of – was that the curriculum in our institution did not provide for academic writing development because there was no apparent need for teaching academic writing. In addition, the models offered to the students before embarking on their first draft of the graduation paper were made available to them informally and out of the respective supervisor’s initiative, not as part of an institutional policy to promote stronger academic writing skills among the students. Therefore my concerns about identifying, adapting or developing an effective pedagogical approach to support the students’ development of academic writing skills.

Coffin et al. have explored “student writing in a changing higher education context” and their conclusion is that

student academic writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of the ‘common sense’ knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary courses. If students lack familiarity with these conventions, the assumption is often held that they will ‘pick it up’ as part of learning their subject knowledge” (Coffin et al., 2005: 3).

In Romania and in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies particularly, genre analysis and the study of texts specific to every discipline are the pedagogical models that bring to the fore the academic conventions and practices, giving students the opportunity to become aware of them. As local circumstances and contexts determine institutional policies, the teaching of academic writing at universities across the world may occur in a variety of academic contexts: “Institutional structures around the world tend to include any of four main locations for the teaching of writing: dedicated writing courses, disciplinary subject courses, English for academic purposes/English for speakers of other languages departments, and study skills or writing centres” (Coffin et al., 2005: 6).

The assumption that students can meet the academic writing requirements at their university if they are taught how to improve their academic writing standards accounts also for the on-line labs providing writing instructions that have been set up extensively by universities outside Romania in order to provide writing guides and manuals of style, alongside feedback from writing experts on student work.

2. Approaches to teaching Academic Writing

On-line or face to face, academic writing instruction builds on three core approaches. The traditional product approach relies on provision of models of good practice, so that students could meet the required academic writing standards by imitating the model samples. As part of the same approach we could mention the focus on genres which involves identification of the text types, explicit analysis in class of the specific requirements of different genres and, ultimately, “explicit awareness of how different disciplines employ different text types and how these text types construct and represent knowledge (both through their text structure and through their use of register)” (Coffin et al., 2005: 46).

The ultimate goal of this approach would be to help the students successfully produce such texts.

In opposition to the product approach and its emphasis on the end result or, in our case, the final writing sample, the process approach focuses on the stages of the academic writing process, on the assumption that by progressing through the prescribed steps students will be able to produce good academic writing practice.

The third approach relies on the social dimension of writing and highlights the social practice it affords. The conventions governing the text types in each academic discipline have been developed by academic communities over time and, by mastering such writing conventions, students can become members of the respective academic communities, thus developing a social identity: “[...] student academic writing is a social practice in that the writers, students, are learning not only to communicate in particular ways, but are learning how to ‘be’ particular kinds of people: that is, to write ‘as academics’, ‘as geographers’, ‘as social scientists’” (Coffin et al., 2005:10).

The approach to writing as socialization also emphasizes the methods of communication traditionally accepted in the academic world alongside the practices of academic writing and research that the academic community considers adequate and productive.

The above approaches can be implicitly intertwined as the basics of the academic style necessarily draw the students’ attention to key issues such as audience, purpose, conventions of academic writing in the respective discipline, organization, and style. In their seminal work “Academic Writing for Graduate Students”, Swales and Feak consider that there is a need for students to “apply their analytical skills to the discourses of their chosen disciplines and to explore how effective academic writing is achieved” (Swales and Feak, 2004:2). In their own words, students are invited to become “ethnographers of their own field” (*ibid*).

In their vision, the students need to identify the “the shaping forces” (*ibid*) of the real-life communities they aspire to join. This can be achieved primarily by compiling a corpus of texts from their own discipline which they will study in depth and then compare to their own writing products.

The complex process of developing the skills of writing for academic purposes appears to require integration of a range of skills:

Writing tasks in higher education often require students to draw upon outside sources and to adopt the styles and genres of academic discourse. They must conduct research, summarize and paraphrase, cite sources, adopt genre conventions that meet audience expectations, and select words and grammatical patterns that are characteristic of less personal and more formal genres of writing. These academic literacy skills can pose challenges when first introduced. To conduct research, students must learn to search for and evaluate sources in terms of credibility and reliability, developing skills of informational literacy (Tardy, 2010:3).

Once they have located sources, students need to learn to paraphrase and summarize” (*ibid*). As stated above, a multitude of study skills contribute to the success of the academic writing approach, thereby accounting for the challenges involved inherent in teaching this type of writing.

3. Local limitations and options

In the Bucharest University of Economic Studies academic writing is not included in the curriculum and its teaching is approached only peripherally and often time informally, mostly in the classes of business communication in foreign languages. The big challenge for the language teachers expected to cater to the students’ complex writing needs detailed above is when and how to hone the students’ academic writing skills when the language teachers have their hands full with the curriculum of the business communication class.

Given the above constraints, the teachers responsible for teaching business communication to undergraduate students in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies opt for streamlining the full range of skills identified as relevant for teaching academic writing skills in (*ibid*). For practical reasons, they may choose to focus on genre models, although “genre approaches remain controversial” (Dudley-Evans, 1997:151). Of the many reasons of concern that Dudley-Evans lists, in the specific teaching environment of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies I am mostly concerned about the fact that “the genre approach takes the writing teacher beyond the basic responsibility of introducing the students to the

‘processes’ of writing into disciplinary concerns that should be handled by the subject teacher” (ibid).

Another feature that further compounds the problem is the limited academic writing practice students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies have in their first language, not to mention in their second language.

It is not uncommon to find that some international students at British universities have had relatively little experience of extensive academic writing even in their first language. Their undergraduate courses may have been dominated by lectures and the examinations by multiple choice answers or answers that involve much more calculation than writing. Such students will need a fairly basic introduction to conventions of writing and the expectations about what an essay, a technical report or a thesis will involve. These students will also need more detailed work on the moves of different sections of theses and their language exponents (Dudley-Evans, 1997:155).

4. Solutions elsewhere

Now that I have highlighted the challenges and limitations on the teacher of business communication in foreign languages who is implicitly expected to focus on developing the students’ academic writing skills, I will survey some of the relevant solutions suggested in other higher education environments, as well as the practical solutions adopted on U.S. campuses.

How is the teaching of academic writing approached in the UK where there is a significant Romanian student community? When the university staff in the UK were asked “how should writing be taught?” (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004:28) as part of a national survey, they ranked their options and suggested solutions as follows.

How is writing being taught, however, and how should it be taught? Staff responding to the national survey indicated that they believe there to be a number of useful ways of developing student writing. [...] the four types of provision deemed most useful by this cross-section of staff include one-to-one tutorials in writing offered via a university writing centre (93%), optional professional courses taught by a writing specialist on subject-specific forms of writing (91%), and optional centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines (88%). Required courses for students and for staff were supported to a lesser extent (65% and 52%),

while the idea of 'required centrally-taught writing courses for students from all disciplines' was categorised as 'useful' by only 44% of respondents (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004:28).

The U.S. approach has at its core the writing center on campus and mandatory freshman courses. Just like in the UK, the writing center tends to be the preferred option for supporting students in their efforts to master academic writing on U.S. campuses as well. In addition, U.S. colleges and universities commonly require their freshmen to take an academic writing course at the beginning of their university study. Such freshman academic writing courses - occasionally enriched with an introduction to academic research, too - are usually offered in the first semester, so as to provide the foundation writing skills required for the multiple writing assignments the students would produce during their study programs. In the Writing seminars students

develop their abilities to craft substantive, motivated, balanced academic arguments; write clear, correct, coherent prose; read with understanding and engagement; plan, draft, and revise efficiently and effectively; evaluate and improve their own reading and writing processes; respond productively to the writing of others; express themselves verbally and converse thoughtfully about complex ideas (Boston University, Writing Program, 2015).

As the above example provided by Boston University suggests, writing is perceived as a learning tool, the teaching of which is integrated with the core academic skills promoted throughout the undergraduate study program.

According to Coffin et al., the origin of these academic writing courses on U.S. campuses lies in the developments that occurred after World War II when increased numbers of what is usually called non-traditional students, such as veterans of World War II, women, increased numbers of members of the racial and ethnic minorities, etc. entered the academic world.

The needs of these students to acquire academic literacy functioned to expose some of the hidden assumptions and practices of the academy. The growth of the composition studies also came from increased attention to theories of teaching and learning writing (Coffin et al., 2005:5-6).

U.S. universities across the nation show a constant concern for teaching academic writing to their students. Writing Centers have been long-cherished assets on the U.S. campus and the compulsory writing and research courses that students take in

the very first semester of year I lay the foundation for the development of solid academic writing skills. This emphasis on developing academic writing from the early stages of the students' academic experience might be also an implicit outcome of the liberal arts educational philosophy, so prevalent on U.S. campuses, which attaches the highest importance to developing communication skills, both orally and in writing.

5. Conclusion

The surveys conducted with the teaching staff of the Modern Languages and Business Communication Department in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies reveal that the faculty look upon teaching of academic writing as a must, given the limited writing skills development that occurs in secondary education in Romania, and the limitations imposed on the Business Communication in Foreign Languages seminars by the current curriculum. The need for teaching academic writing to business students in Bucharest definitely is a painful reality for both students and faculty, extensively documented by the thorough editing, the multiple versions and the overall joint struggle of both students and faculty supervisor when the students take part in the Students' Scientific Contest held every April. This contest requires the attending students to conduct research, write a paper, and present it to the examining committee, proceeding through the three stages under the supervision of a faculty member.

In terms of the models that teachers of business communication offer to their students in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in order to develop their awareness of writing academic conventions or practices, the genre approach is very prevalent, on the assumption that business articles from "The Economist", "The Wall Street Journal", and other trade press will help undergraduate students identify the specifics of business text types, thus helping them pick up academic writing by sheer osmosis.

In our teaching practice, the actual teaching of academic writing is quite marginal and painfully limited throughout the first two years of study. In year III students focus for one full semester on Business Communication in Writing and this is their golden opportunity to become familiar with the range of genres available in the field and their specific conventions.

Although the teaching of academic writing is not tackled in a dedicated course in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, it is still approached mostly as embedded in the third and last year of undergraduate study in the Written Business Communication discipline that is allocated one two-hour practical seminar per week. As part of this discipline students are exposed to a selection of

business documents illustrating the variety of written communication relevant to the business world. From inquiry messages to contracts, from promotional materials to job applications, from letters of complain to letters of recommendation and beyond, this intensive learning opportunity emphasizes genre analysis and encourages students to become aware of the specific layout, structure, and conventions of the most relevant text types in the Anglo-American business practice.

In addition to this, language faculty constantly goad students into reading the trade press in English on a regular basis, by suggesting business articles of choice or by inviting students to read, summarize, and recommend articles of their own choice. Students may also be required to write articles and business documents as further opportunities to internalize the specific features of each text type and consolidate their command of the style, terminology, layout and overall conventions.

Generally speaking, the class of English for Business Purposes or the equivalent approach in French and German provides the only environment for developing academic writing with the students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. However, given the learning objectives set for the Business English class in each year of study, teaching academic writing is perceived as a peripheral concern by the faculty, as they are oftentimes pressed to develop the students' business vocabulary and concepts, help expand their relevant skills, hone their presentation skills, engage them in intercultural awareness-raising activities, do remedial grammar work, and more.

To conclude, the teaching of academic writing is indeed invisible in the curriculum worked out for year I and year II students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, but it surfaces unexpectedly and sporadically, for one semester only, in year III in the Written Business Communication discipline. According to the teachers' perceptions as gauged informally in staff meetings and peer-to-peer conversations, writing is the least developed skill in the academic environment of our institution. Therefore the faculty in the department of modern languages and business communication recommend addressing the teaching of academic writing in an optional course open to all first year students, or in one-to-one sessions offered in a writing center.

Although the solutions outlined above are, in principle, viable and practical, their materialization appears remote and fuzzy. That is the reason for the dichotomy in the title: *The Experience of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies vs U.S. University Practice*, so as to emphasize that the teaching of academic writing is perceived as a relatively low priority in our comprehensive business university on account of the osmosis assumption, while on U.S. campuses it is granted full attention and is brought to the students' attention in the early stages of their university experience, in the form of a mandatory freshman course, oftentimes

scheduled in the very first semester. The work on academic writing skills development that occurs in such courses is further recycled, consolidated and enriched in the writing centers or the study skills centers on U.S. campuses throughout the students' academic experience.

The approach towards teaching academic writing at our institution resonates with the laissez-faire direction in the economy, as it expects academic writing to take care of itself, on the assumption that by exposing students to good examples of text types relevant for the business world they will become aware of the conventions, internalize them and then rise to the expected standards of producing adequate academic writing when required to do so. To me, the approach is more of an aspiration than the every-day reality we notice in class, it is idealistic and has limited foundation, according to my pedagogical experience.

At the very opposite end of the teaching academic writing spectrum, U.S. universities take a firm interventionist approach, leave nothing to chance, and have their students attend a dedicated course, so as to learn what they do not know yet in terms of academic writing or hone whatever writing skills they may have already developed. Clarity, good structure, persuasive writing, and conciseness, together with original work and research are considered key assets on the U.S. campus; therefore they are taught in class and then constantly nurtured in the writing centers freely available to students.

Infinite trust in the students' ingenuity and in their ability to learn the complexities of academic writing mostly by themselves seems to be the gist of our institutional approach. The U.S. campus chooses to take a very methodological approach to teaching academic writing and developing the students' writing skills, with clearly set learning objectives and milestones, and to project a long-term perspective on it by constantly emphasizing academic writing throughout the whole academic experience, assessing it repeatedly in the form of assignments in varied subjects, and steadily developing the skills by means of faculty feedback.

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The author

Mihaela Arsene is an associate professor of business communication in English with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. The landmarks of her professional development were the master programs she completed in the UK - with the University of Manchester ("Master of Education") - and the USA - with University of San Francisco ("Master of International and Multicultural Education"), under the aegis of the British Council and the Fulbright Commission, respectively. Her current research interests lie in the area of teacher education, student development and empowerment, U.S. academic excellence, liberal arts education, the economic history of Britain and the USA, and university engagement with the community.