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Students' writing skills as a factor enhancing the company brand¹

The aim of the paper is to identify the problems faced by students when writing different types of texts in professional life. The study is based on a qualitative 5-question survey conducted at the Turku University of Applied Sciences and on the analysis of the results of a writing course. The survey revealed that students have difficulties in distinguishing various types of texts. They were mostly familiar with literary genres and texts which they were required to write in the course of their studies, such as reports and blogposts. They knew that they needed good writing skills and were aware of their difficulties in producing different types of texts. Few students realized that they would need the ability to write several types of texts in professional life. The major writing problems included inaccuracy of the idea, unaddressed message, incoherence of style, and failure to take the reader into account. Many students seemed to lack planning, writing, and editing skills. They need to improve their style, knowledge of the different types of texts, and ability to evaluate the information sources. Discussing the subsequent versions of texts helped the students to find their personal voice as authors, which, if it corresponds to the company values, could serve to enhance the company brand.

Keywords: international relations, communication, competence, use of knowledge, learning by doing

JEL classification: I20, I23

Umiejętność pisania tekstów wśród studentów jako czynnik wzmacniający markę przedsiębiorstwa

Celem artykułu jest wskazanie trudności, z jakimi borykają się studenci podczas pisania tekstów w życiu zawodowym. Artykuł bazuje na wynikach składającej się z pięciu pytań ankiety przeprowadzonej na Uniwersytecie Nauk Stosowanych w Turku oraz na analizie rezultatów kursu pisania. Wyniki ankiety wskazują, że studenci mają trudności z rozróżnieniem różnych typów tekstu. Znają gatunki literackie i teksty, które przygotowuje się w czasie studiów, takie jak raporty oraz wpisy na blogach. Studenci zauważyli, że umiejętność pisania jest im potrzebna, potwierdzili jednak, że mają trudności z przygotowaniem różnych rodzajów tekstów. Niewielu zdawało sobie sprawę z konieczności przygotowywania wielu typów pism w pracy zawodowej. Największe

¹ We wish to thank our language editors, Mirva Virtanen, MA, Turku University of Applied Sciences, and Iina Pääkkönen, MA.

problemy dotyczyły braku precyzji, niepełnych informacji, niespójności stylistycznej i uwzględniania docelowego odbiorcy. Wielu studentom brakuje umiejętności planowania, pisania oraz redakcji. Poprawę wymaga styl i świadomość różnych rodzajów tekstów, a także umiejętność krytycznej analizy źródeł. Dyskusje przeprowadzone w oparciu o kolejne wersje tekstów pomogły studentom odnaleźć swój osobisty głos jako autorów, który, jeśli pokrywa się z wartościami przedsiębiorstwa, mógłby przyczynić się do wzmocnienia jego marki.

Słowa kluczowe: relacje międzynarodowe, komunikacja, kompetencja, wykorzystanie wiedzy, nauka poprzez praktykę

Klasyfikacja JEL: I20, I23

Introduction

Writing skills are required in increasingly many professions. Literacy and writing skills had spread throughout Finland from the skills of priests and scholars to the globally accessible online world that enables anyone to be a full-fledged member of the society. Teaching and writing are the core of the academic community. As teachers, however, we have found that regardless of the type of text, students do not find writing easy – it causes them much anguish, which in turn can have a negative impact on their writing skills.

An important topic in the social discourse concerns the ways to prevent the exclusion of young people. From a writing point of view, the question could be: how to promote student involvement in the society, i.e., how to support their learning abilities and organize their learning process. Mickwitz [2013, pp. 100–101] conducted a study among Swedish-speaking university students in Finland who experienced difficulties in writing and concluded that:

- the academic way of thinking requires getting used to,
- text structure should be planned more carefully,
- knowledge of the different types of texts should be improved,
- students need more writing guidance,
- extensive writing tasks should be divided into smaller projects.

English is widely used in academic discussions, which makes students less familiar with the conventions of their own language [Mickwitz, 2013, p. 101]. In his later study, Mickwitz [2017] found that half of the students had problems finding a suitable learning strategy to improve their writing competency [cf. Vilka, 2015, p. 23]. They felt that they needed teacher guidance in editing their texts [Mickwitz, 2017, pp. 52–53].

Most (97%) of the workforce are required to write in their workplace every day. Experts hired by companies estimate that employees spend up to 50% of their time writing different kinds of texts². Young people also write daily, describing their meaningful experiences on social media platforms, and find it rewarding.

However, expression and argumentation require training. The author also has to decide what to include in the text and how to build it. Peer feedback puts his argumentation to the test, which inspires and encourages him to find his own voice in a process similar to coaching [see e.g. Beard, 2017]. It is challenging for students to be able to use feedback to develop and elaborate their texts [Kniivilä et al., 2017]. And teachers need to reflect upon whether their own interpretations and preferences influence the evaluation of their students' texts.

Transparent languages, such as Finnish or Italian, are easier to learn than non-transparent. However, 6–10% of Finland's population have been diagnosed with dyslexia [Celia, 2018], a disorder that affects the understanding of instructions as well as self-esteem. Students with learning disabilities need to discuss their situation with the teacher so that the instructions can be made clear and they can process the topic. There has not been enough research yet on how common is dyslexia among students who study Finnish as a second language in Finland.

Business life is often hectic and managers may not have the resources to proof-read every text or check its accuracy, but in the academic setting it is important to remember that if a student has dyslexia, he needs more time and support to complete writing tasks because it is more difficult for him to deal with voice-related information, which results in slower and more erroneous reading and writing [Celia, 2018].

A company's growth strategy requires that its customers make more frequent purchases, pay more, or that its customer base expands continually [Kilpinen, 2008, p. 70]. Just like searching for a new and creative business idea, writing requires persistence. It is a multiphase process, not a one-time activity. More often than not, publishing written texts increases a company's visibility and customer base, which promotes its business and allows it grow.

1. Companies in the international business environment need good writers

Companies have to publish polished and interesting texts which reflect their brand. With the help of press releases, newsletters, articles, reports, social media posts, etc., they create a distinct image and strengthen their brand. With an elaborate choice of words, they can influence the customer's point of view and achieve the desired image. Business thrives if the brand meets the expectations of the target group. However, felicitous phrases alone are not enough – more is required of a good text.

² Tanner, spoken statement about interviews with companies on 8 June 2017.

Big companies are able to hire professional writers to ensure fluent communication, but SMEs may not have the necessary resources. Employees who enjoy writing may actively produce blogposts etc., but their texts are often not reader-oriented. Instead, they meander and become so saturated with business jargon that they cannot serve the reader unfamiliar with the used terminology.

Do students have enough skills to produce different types of texts in their professional life? Good writing skills are not enough if students do not understand the conventions of the requested type of text. A blogpost and a press release may handle the same topic, but they do it in thoroughly different ways. Students should be aware of what kind of readers they are addressing, the context, and the publishing platform, as all this necessitates a different kind of text, which should be seen as a whole and as representative of a specific text type.

At the Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS) we studied this global phenomenon. Students struggle with business writing even though they should be able to produce any requested type of text. How can we improve their writing skills and knowledge of different text types? How can students express themselves in writing clearly, using an appropriate tone?

2. Survey and pilot course on writing skills in professional life

In February 2018, we conducted a survey on students' writing skills. To gain a wider perspective and gather answers from an international, heterogeneous population, we surveyed three different groups: Finnish, international, and exchange students. In total, 64 students at different stages of their studies took part in the survey. The survey was anonymous, but we gathered some personal information, such as age and field of study. The respondents studied, e.g., business, international business, industrial management, industrial sales, sales engineering, chemical and materials engineering, business administration, telecommunications, social services, medicine, and biotechnology.

Our aim was to find out what types of texts students are accustomed to write, what writing skills they think they might need in their future jobs, and what writing means to them. In order to determine that, we asked them the following open questions:

1. What types of texts do you know?
2. What types of texts do you write weekly?
3. Why do you write them?
4. What kind of writing skills you might need in your future job?
5. What does writing mean to you?

We conducted the theoretical survey with different groups of students because our teaching experience showed us that textual awareness is not apparent during practical courses, when students produce texts. Our hypothesis was that students are not familiar with types of texts required in professional life and that they very rarely write them.

The types of texts mentioned in the respondents' answers to questions 1 and 2 were compared to the answers to questions 3 and 4. The students most frequently listed text types which they are required to write during their studies: essays (32) and emails (29), followed by reports (25), blogposts (14), and poems (15). Other text types were listed 1–11 times, and some of the answers indicated that the students were unfamiliar with the term "text type". These answers alone cannot confirm our hypothesis; although an essay is usually not considered a business text, emails, reports, and blogposts are among the texts produced in professional life. Their objective and motive for writing them is, however, different – they must represent the company's or writer's brand.

In their answers to question 3, the students stated that their reason for writing is to comply with the requirements of their teachers, to communicate with their friends, and to share information. Some of them also consider writing a form of entertainment or a hobby.

The conducted survey does not tell us to what extent business writing is practiced in the course of studies in different countries and degree programs. This would be an interesting and important topic to be explored as part of our forthcoming international project. At TUAS, business writing is taught during Finnish and communication courses. There may be other courses offered as part of different projects, but do students have the motivation to acquire knowledge and skills of business writing if there are free but optional courses available?

Students expect that in their future professional life they will need to possess good writing skills, the ability to quickly produce scientific texts, and to express themselves in a concise, precise manner, using correct grammar and fluent English. Some also realize the need to know different types of texts, primarily related to internal communications within organizations, such as emails, summaries, reports, and contracts.

None of the answers mentioned texts targeted at people outside the company, such as blogposts, press releases, social media posts, or articles. The results therefore support our hypothesis that students are not familiar with the types of texts used in professional life; they do not write texts for customers or business partners, only for friends, family, teachers, etc. They do not have any experience in planning, writing, and editing texts aimed at different target groups.

In the spring of 2018 we organized a course "Bringing textual structures to life by revision", which aimed at fostering students' writing skills. The focus was on

both business and academic texts. The students were allowed to choose between two or three different texts (e.g. thesis and blogpost or CV, blogpost, and report). They wrote blogposts related to their field of study and could choose the subject freely. The idea was to familiarize them with the writing process in order to teach them how to produce high-quality reader-oriented texts.

High quality of such texts can only be ensured if they are refined in the course of a multiphase process. Students cannot expect to produce a satisfying text in one go; rather, they need to edit it repeatedly based on self-evaluation and peer feedback, which will allow them to communicate their own ideas to the reader in a clear way [Kniivilä et al., 2017, p. 30].

The course was part of the KILKAS project involving five universities of applied sciences in Finland that focused on competitiveness and growth in promoting employment of foreign students. This 2.5-year project aimed to improve their professional skills by developing support and guidance systems, organizing internships, and helping them to plan their theses and careers in cooperation with local businesses [XAMK, 2018]. TUAS performed many different activities in order to reach this goal.

Our course was attended by 9 students for whom Finnish was the second language. In the future all attendees wish to live and work in Finland, but some consider the idea of working abroad as tempting as well. The number of participants was limited due to the fact that the course ad was on the intranet for just two weeks and that it started in March (students plan their schedules in January). One student signed up for the course because of the ad, two students were asking for a supplementary Finnish course, three signed up encouraged by their teacher because their language skills were not sufficient to complete the compulsory communication course (which requires CEFR level C), two students heard about it from a friend and wanted to improve their Finnish, one student thought it would help him in the last phase of working on his thesis.

Two of the students are doing their degrees in English, others are taking all their courses in Finnish. The group included IT and construction engineering students. The course was assigned 5 credits, which corresponds to 135 hours of work. There were 21 hours for meetings with the whole group and no more than 10 hours for meetings in smaller groups or individual meetings. The students' oral language skills were rated A2.2–C1 and written language skills A2.2–B2.2. The course was aimed primarily at students for whom Finnish was as a second language, but it was also open to native speakers who needed help with writing their bachelor's thesis. However, no native speakers signed up.

The course included exercises to develop both oral and writing skills. It used the evaluation criteria of the TUAS innovation pedagogy which emphasize the development of one's own skills. One task consisted in writing a blogpost; we no-

ticed that, in line with the Pareto principle, 20% of the authors considered finding the main idea for the first version of the text difficult. None of the students had dyslexia, but one of them informed us that he was a slow reader and writer. He had no problem finding the subject for his post, but understanding the instructions caused him some difficulties.

University teachers offer support, advice, guidance, and feedback during writing tasks, but such help is not always available in professional life. Both the course and the survey confirmed the same observation, namely that students do not have the skills to produce texts for customers or business partners.

3. Writing problems

3.1. Writer's attitude

One factor that hinders students' ability to write is uncertainty. They can be unsure as to what kind of text they are supposed to produce and how to modify it to meet different needs in different contexts. The survey and the pilot course also revealed they are largely unfamiliar with business texts. We frequently hear from our colleagues that students are not aware that they will need writing skills to do their job or that they already feel proficient enough. However, if they do not realize the need for further learning, their competence remains superficial. Universities educate researchers, and the task of universities of applied sciences is to prepare students for writing business texts in their professional life.

Before starting to write, the writer must already have a clear idea of the purpose of the text, the appropriate tone, the audience, and the publishing platform. The latter immensely influences the text: in online posts, sentences and paragraphs should be shorter and more compact; a handout or a press release should cite the most important facts first; the most interesting part of a blogpost can be left until the end. In each case, the writer must think carefully about what he wants to convey.

The voice of the author manifests itself in language and rhetoric, but it is also connected to self-image, self-esteem, and confidence, and thus to the involvement in academic and social life. In addition to intelligence and emotions, the author's voice also expresses his will: what he wants to achieve and what he wants to say. Expressing the main idea in one sentence clarifies that desire [Kniivilä et al., 2017].

Professional courses should put much emphasis on business writing exercises. Texts produced during the communications course are usually linked to professional life, but one course is not enough. Optional writing courses offer the best opportunity for peer evaluation, can greatly increase motivation, and help students to develop a positive attitude towards writing. They need to remember that

the first version of the text is only an imperfect draft – before their final version is ready, all published texts go through many processing and editing phases. Developing a line of thought and expressing it in writing requires time [Kniivilä et al., 2017].

Writing skills are part of professional competence and all teachers of professional and communications courses are responsible for instilling them in their students. Their classrooms should be filled with motivated writers. Perhaps the reason why there are not enough writing courses is the students' lack of interest in writing. Since they do not regard it as a meaningful activity, they are not inclined to improve their writing skills. Students are used to writing their papers only just in time and in one go, which makes it feel like a duty instead of a learning experience. In addition to more practice, a change of mind-set would be welcome.

The survey revealed that most students perceive writing as a "challenge" or a "duty" [see Mickwitz, 2013, p. 101]. Only a couple of students answered that "[writing] is important, it brings so much fun" and "sometimes I write just to relax".

3.2. Forgetting the reader

Uncertainty may even prevent students from appreciating their own ideas, but they should remember that although they may doubt whether they have anything important to say at all, a thought that they consider ordinary the reader may in fact find very interesting. They should always write about a subject that fascinates them and that they know well, and if someone else chooses the subject for them, they must be able to find an angle that motivates them to write. Finding motivation and learning to become interested in any topic is also one of the aspects of writing skills. Familiarity with the types of texts offers a framework, but it is the writer's task to fill it with engaging content. During the course "Bringing textual structures to life by revision" we noticed that students were not accustomed to writing to a specified reader.

Uncertainty and unwillingness to share one's own thoughts in writing may also push students to use other people's work. Plagiarizing is not allowed for both legal reasons and because it gives businesses a bad reputation. We experienced it during the course, when two students copy-pasted unmodified long extracts from different websites with no source references [cf. Mickwitz, 2013, p. 101]. Students may not know how to use sources properly but they should be aware that hasty work will not allow them to achieve their target [Kilpinen, 2008, p. 77]. Writing requires concentration, so multi-tasking is not an option – and the final result is only revealed when the writing process is completed [Kniivilä et al., 2017].

Copy-pasting makes the final result resemble a summary of different texts and does not convey anything new. In such instances the connection between theory and practice is lost. Writing skills should be practiced during university courses that focus on more than the process of preparing a thesis, so that they can be ap-

plied in professional life. For example, a report is considerably more compact than a thesis, and while theses are usually read by representatives of the same academic community, a report could be read by anyone. Moreover, students need to remember that even if a report utilizes tables to visualize, e.g., the sales of a company, the data must also be presented in words. The author needs to explain his thinking process and his conclusions as well as allow the reader to draw conclusions on his own.

In a hurry or under pressure, students commonly resort to plagiarism and forget about source criticism and respect for other writers. However, no company wants their published text caught resembling texts of other businesses or other source texts too much. Today, when all information is just a click away, source criticism is more important than ever.

Extensive use of specialized language is also a sign that the reader has been forgotten. Each profession has its own abbreviations, distinct expressions, and terminology, but a good text should be understandable to everyone. The author needs to be able to illustrate complex topics to serve the reader as a customer. Storification is a trend of our times that is strongly reflected, i.e., in ads and on company websites. It is effective, because a dramatic arc in the text holds the reader's attention until the last word, provides information, and evokes new thoughts.

One of the students attending the course wrote a blogpost whose first version would probably have been left unread by an ordinary reader. It concerned an interesting technological invention, but used terms familiar only to experts in the field. The structure also left much to be desired, making it difficult to get the whole picture about the subject. With peer and teacher feedback, the blogpost was rewritten to be more interesting and clearer. The subject became easier to understand and to remember.

Editing is an important skill and a phase in the process of writing in which the reader is taken into account. The reader may stop reading if the content and language are not polished. The text may suffer from unnecessary repetitions, tedious expressions, and abundance of specialized vocabulary. If the writer is not focused, he will not be able to maintain the flow of the text and the reader will see it as a lack of motivation. On the other hand, if the author is thinking clearly, his thoughts will be clear for the reader as well.

3.3. Incoherent style

Writing style is affected by a number of elements. The student must be able to write and, more importantly, edit the style of the text to suit the situation, purpose, publishing platform, and, most of all, the company and its brand.

The tone lies in the diction. How the choice of words is received depends on the time and place, the culture and, above all, the context. Certain phrases can be

associated with something culturally familiar, e.g., a line from a well-known movie or song. Such intertextuality is used in social media, blogposts, and especially in advertising, as the consumer's interest is caught when the familiar is combined with the new. It is like a never-ending chain or a growing network in which words obtain new meaning in a new context without losing their original connotations [Solin, 2001].

The style thus depends on references, but also on vocabulary. When writing on a certain subject, it is easy to start using too many words around the same theme, which may result in a clichéd text. On the other hand, if students are trying to write convincingly, the text may also suffer as a result of an overly official language which silences the author's personal voice.

Making appropriate linguistic and stylistic choices is more difficult when using one's second language; it is also affected by the fact that speech is usually stronger than the written language. With the increasing use of social media, the written language is becoming more and more akin to speech and loses some of its formality. Young people may find it difficult to distinguish different tones as they have less experience in certain situations. This was also the case during our course. In their emails to the teachers, four students used only lowercase letters and structures more fitting for Whatsapp messages: "cool. i thank you !!". Such emails are inappropriate and testify to the students' lack of feel for language and situation. They rarely used greetings or full structured sentences.

In Finland, it has been found that there is a significant gap between the knowledge of different types of texts of upper secondary school students and university requirements [Leino, Torvelainen, 2011]. Limited resources can by no means ensure that they learn the necessary skills. This is why a more economical alternative is needed – for instance, training via the Internet.

4. The underlying causes

During their studies, students usually write their texts in one go and although they receive grades and feedback, they very rarely edit their papers, except when writing scripts. Usually there is only one obligatory writing course carried out at the beginning of studies. The selection of optional courses depends on the university, but students may not feel the need to practice writing until they realize that their work can be made more functional and interesting.

According to an American study, many students think that writing skills are not very necessary in professional life. In line with our own experience, the study also showed that students believe that they already write well enough, even though the writing tasks proved that the reality was quite different. The study was

attended by 140 students [Simkin, 2012, pp. 81–95]. In Finland, many young people think that writing is important, but they consider it difficult [Leino, 2011].

There is a deeper problem in the background. Many recent studies show a decline in literacy [e.g. Harjunen, Rautopuro, 2015; Lakka, 2015]. The younger students' ability to read and write in their native language should be improved. Harjunen and Rautopuro [2015] conducted a study on a sample of 5,144 teenagers aged 15–16 and found that while girls wrote rather well, one in five boys could not even write a simple summer job application.

The first versions of CVs written during our course were nothing more than short lists of hobbies, education, and work experience. The students did not know how to convincingly present their skills, but the visual layer of their documents was satisfactory because of their ability to use different programs and applications for creating CVs and the fact that they consider presentation to be important for making a good first impression. With feedback, they were eventually able to create well-structured and useful CVs.

Seppänen [2015] estimates that every year approximately 1,000 boys and 200 girls aged 15–16 graduate from comprehensive schools with writing skills matching the level of 11–12-year-olds. The international PISA study covers the same age group. In 2015, 73 countries participated in the study; 20% of the students did not meet the criteria for literacy. The Finnish youth were ranked fourth in terms of their reading skills [OECD, 2015].

Our survey showed that the majority of students see writing as an obligation or a challenge. Do they feel negatively about writing because they find it difficult to convey their ideas in a written form? Do they find writing boring? Some of the respondents also mentioned the pleasure and joy that writing brings them when it originates from their own interests or needs and when they are able to accurately express their own thoughts.

The more the students read and write, the more powerful texts they can produce. Reading and writing daily promotes writing skills and expands the vocabulary. However, students need to remember that their distinct style is shaped by the texts they read. Stylistic awareness will help them make the editing phase progress smoother.

Conclusions

This paper draws attention to three key aspects of business writing: (1) style and awareness of different types of texts, (2) source criticism, as well as (3) the reader, the content, and the publishing platform.

Students' writing can be seen as their brand and their way of showing how knowledgeable they are [Ahola, 2017]. In our survey, the students mostly identi-

fied the types of texts they are required to write in the course of their studies, such as reports, essays, and emails. During the course "Bringing textual structures to life by revision" we aimed to improve their awareness of the various types of texts and the subsequent stages of the writing process as well as their ability to write convincingly and meet the requirements of a specific context. This was facilitated by working together in a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary environment.

Students' beliefs about their own competence affect the results of their work. Learning difficulties tend to affect their self-image and self-esteem [Reid, Kirk, 2001; Reid, 2016, pp. 158–159], but people with dyslexia can also become writers after obtaining the support they need. However, even when students do not have reading disorders, writing causes them difficulties. We aimed to make this process easier by opening a dialogue about the texts in small groups and exchanging ideas in order to improve upon the content and the way of expression and to help the students' find their personal voice. In professional life, texts are prepared in stages, and students need to practice this way of organizing their work. An additional challenge is to harmoniously unite the voices of various authors.

Paradoxically, in the process of writing creativity needs to be combined with discipline [Kniivilä et al., 2017]. Although we advised our students to approach writing as a process, initially they were still under the impression that their blog-posts would be ready in one go. They needed three to five editing phases to express their thoughts in their own voice and the final texts differed considerably from their first versions. Only one student's text required minor corrections. All students edited the title, structure, and content of their texts. Although evaluating the text is a sensitive issue for the author, six of our nine students took the feedback positively, even passionately.

After graduating, students continue their development as experts in their own field, and writing skills can only be learned by writing. From the perspective of further research, it would be interesting to develop models of writing exercises that could be used in universities of applied sciences to help different types of students practice their writing.

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