

# APPROACHING A WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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## Abstract

*The article firstly discusses cultural differences between Western and Central European cultures as far as the academic register is concerned. Moreover, the fact why Czech students have a lack of experience in writing is explained. Secondly, the most problematic areas – linguistic and stylistic – (e.g. articles, word order, indirect speech, long sentences, register . . . ) the first-year students at the Faculty of Informatics and Management in the Czech Republic have to pay attention to when they write an academic paper in English are being analyzed. Thirdly, a new approach to writing at a university level is introduced and a few challenging assignments how to make writing more attractive are explored in the article. Thus, the reader might experience how students increase their communicative competence in writing, their motivation, cultural awareness and responsibility when, for instance, they write an article for Wikipedia.*

**Key words:** assignments, blended learning, mistakes, students, writing.

## Introduction

There exist cultural differences in perception and understanding of the academic register in different countries. Clyne (1987) and Duszak (1994) characterize English as *low context culture* while German, Czech or Polish belong to *high context academic cultures*. That means that the English academic texts are more clear and easy to understand than the German texts which are more complex, full of nominalisations, compounds and modals. In England writers are responsible for clarity of the discourse. Moreover, the academic texts are more pragmatic and therefore more connected with practice. The reason is that in the Anglo-Saxon world academic discourse developed within applied linguistics. Thus, one does not speak about the written academic language but about discipline called writing. At universities it is academic writing.

In Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing are still neglected because writing is perceived as a skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools by mastering grammatical and spelling rules. *Writing is seen as an individual gift* (Cmejrkova et al., 1999, p.34). On the contrary, in the Anglo-Saxon world writing is perceived as the skill which can be taught, practise and master.

As it has been stated in the previous paragraph, Czech students have a lack of experience in writing since they practise it mainly at the basic school. Therefore the level of their writing is often very poor. This is particularly true for higher education. Gillet (2004) sees writing as the most problematic use of English in Higher Education. Writing tasks vary from writing short answers in exams to writing dissertations and theses, and EAP courses often concentrate on the process of writing – planning, organising, presenting, re-writing, and proofreading. Typical writing skills include research and using sources; writing different text types as well as different genres; and using appropriate style. See also Cmejrkova (1999).

Undergraduates or even Ph.D. students have problems in writing their bachelor, diploma and thesis, or just to write a short scientific article or review. Once again it is connected with an insufficient training of the writing skill. Therefore to help university students to improve this skill one must bear in mind that:

- high cultural and social value is placed on a written version of the language,
- the term *literacy* is almost synonymous with proficiency in written language,
- key definitions of what is the standard language, what is correct and proper and even what is grammar are based on what has been described and codified in the written language. (Carter, 1995)

Thus, to improve students' written skills, the article concentrates on the analysis of their written papers and the most pivotal mistakes are being discussed and revamped. For the purpose of this paper 40 students' essays (*Students' essays*, 2009- 2010) of both full-time and part-time students were analyzed and evaluated for their formal and stylistic-linguistic mistakes.

The students who participated in this research study English as an applied language, i.e. the English that they most likely will need in their future jobs. In this case students aim to become travel or tourism managers. In addition, they are in their first year of study and they are enrolled in the course on the Cultural History of Great Britain taught at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove. The classes are run only in English, which sometimes causes slight problems because although all students have passed the university entrance examination in the English language, their level of English still varies. Ideally, their level of English should correspond to level B2 of the Common European Reference Framework for languages; this corresponds to a TOEIC score of between 541-700 or an IELTS score of 5-6.

This compulsory course is taught over one academic year which consists of two semesters. Within one year students have a chance to discover and discuss historical and cultural aspects of Great Britain from the pre-historic period up to the present times. The winter semester ends with a credit. To obtain the credit, students have to write an essay. The pass mark is 75%. The essay is evaluated for its content, accuracy, layout, references and bibliography. In fact, students should possess knowledge of academic writing, which is also taught at the faculty as an optional subject. Furthermore, the content of the essay reflects their critical thinking regarding both the British history and literature with reference to the study materials of the winter semester. Moreover, students are provided with a simple essay framework which enhances their thinking skills (see Bloom, 1956; Fisher, 2006). Sample essay topics are as follows:

- Civil War and John Milton  
(Discuss John Milton's attitude to the Civil War of 1642-49. Demonstrate some aspects of the influence of the war on Milton's *Paradise Lost*.)
- The 18<sup>th</sup> Century Literature in England  
(Discuss one of the literary works written within this historical period. Show the effect of some political, economic or social conditions on the work's heroes and their activities.)

### **Analyzing Student's Writings**

In this paper examples of the most common mistakes students make in the above-mentioned essays are listed, their causes are outlined and readers are provided with advice how to improve their formal written speech as far as the problematic areas are concerned. Furthermore, one can also assume that the students whose English is their major might not make such mistakes. The mistakes concern two main aspects if contents mistakes are excluded: **formal** aspects (that is the layout of the paper and its structure, graphics . . .) including bibliography

and making references, and **linguistic-stylistic** aspects (grammar and spelling, stylistics, and punctuation).

In the **formal** area students lack mainly the knowledge of writing bibliographies and references since there is not any compulsory subject where this is taught except the optional one semester subject of *Academic Writing*. Moreover, students in the first year are not consistently exposed to quoting the sources in their classes since the majority of their credit assignments does not require that. Therefore they are not fully aware of what plagiarism really means. Out of 40 essays only 1 was correct for its bibliography and references although students were given a mini-lecture how to do that.

The information stated in the paragraphs of any scientific paper must be supported by references to show the professionalism of one's work but also to avoid plagiarism. Referencing is referring someone to the source. References (also called citations) show the reader different aspects on which one's work is based.

Minor mistakes then concerned the layout of the essay. Students' weakest point is usually the conclusion where they should expressed their own opinion on the analyzed reading within the historical context. Very often the conclusion is not persuasive enough. Nevertheless, mistakes in the layout and also references are slightly easier to remove for a non-native speaker than the linguistic-stylistic mistakes.

The most frequent basic **linguistic** mistakes for our students as non-native speakers of the English language seem to be:

1. articles
2. word order
3. indirect speech
4. concord in subject and predicate

## 1. Articles

Undoubtedly, articles are the most problematic elements. Students usually rarely use them because in their native language (Czech) they do not need them.

<i>William Shakespeare had significant influence. (wrong)</i>
<i>William Shakespeare had <b>a</b> significant influence. (right)</i>
<i>It was written in 1819 and placed into 12<sup>th</sup> century England. (wrong)</i>
<i>It was written in 1819 and placed into <b>the</b> 12<sup>th</sup> century England. (right)</i>
<i>Puritans were represented by Oliver Cromwell. (wrong)</i>
<i><b>The</b> Puritans were represented by Oliver Cromwell. (right)</i>

## 2. Word order

This is considered to be a very bad mistake in English and is obviously caused by interference from the Czech language. Although it is not a very common mistake at this level, even good students make it. As stated in Biber et al., 1999, the term word order is most often used to refer to the order of the elements in the clause, elements in which are, of course, often each realized by phrases or clauses rather than just one word each: subject, verb, objects, and adverbials. Thus, English word order is usually fixed while Czech word order is flexible.

<i>In this work are depicted the life and mentality of people . . . . (wrong)</i>
<i>In this work the life and mentality of people <b>are depicted</b> . . . . (right)</i>

<i>During her era was the English language brought to the height of its beauty. (wrong)</i>
<i>During her era the English language <b>was brought</b> to the height of its beauty. (right)</i>
<i>In the literature is a remarkable contrast between the negative and the positive hero. (wrong)</i>
<i>In the literature <b>there is</b> a remarkable contrast between the negative and the positive hero. (right)</i>

### 3. Indirect speech or indirect thought

The simple past in the reporting verb may cause the verb in the subordinate reported clause to be backshifted into the simple past or into the past perfect. Once again it is a common interference form the Czech language where this phenomenon does not exist.

<i>The Selkie said she has to become . . . . (wrong)</i>
<i>The Selkie said she <b>had</b> to become . . . . (right)</i>
<i>They believed that the Selkies have souls. (wrong)</i>
<i>They believed that the Selkies <b>had</b> souls. (right)</i>

### 4. Concord in subject and predicate

The most common mistake was in the concord of the book title with a corresponding verb, which is obviously an interference from the Czech language. That means if the title of the book is in plural, the corresponding verb is then in plural as well. On the contrary, in English the verb correlates with the word book, not the title, and therefore, the verb must be in singular.

<i>The Sonnets are not focused on that. (wrong)</i>
<i><b>The Sonnets is</b> not focused on that. (right)</i>
<i>Canterbury Tales are divided . . . . (wrong)</i>
<i><b>Canterbury Tales is</b> divided . . . . (right)</i>

Among other common mistakes students tend to make one can notice the inappropriate use of adjectives with prepositions and prepositions themselves.

<i>Rich fantasy is typical for the Celts. (wrong)</i>
<i>Rich fantasy is <b>typical of</b> the Celts. (right)</i>
<i>He was popular especially due to his pamphlets. (wrong)</i>
<i>He was popular especially <b>thanks to</b> his pamphlets. (right)</i>

On the whole, both grammatical and spelling mistakes can be removed by using the Spellchecker or asking someone else to proofread for us. The best person to do it would be a native speaker.

In the area of **stylistics** students usually have difficulties with the following aspects:

1. register and appropriacy

2. extremely long sentences
3. incorrect choice of a word or a phrase
4. punctuation
5. objectivity of one's work

### 1. Register and appropriacy

It is very common that students do not know how to use certain words in the appropriate register, in this case the register of academic language, when they are preparing written work. Thus, when writing a formal paper, they should avoid colloquialisms and informal modes of expressions. They should use only Standard English.

<i>So he was expelled from Camelot. (wrong)</i>
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<i><u>Therefore</u>, he was expelled from Camelot. (right)</i>
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The Theological Faculty in Oxford (*Writing a Dissertation or Thesis*, 2004) provides students with the following guidelines on the matter of style: 'candidates are advised to consult a work such as *Style Book: Notes for Authors, Editors, and Writers of Dissertations*, published by the Modern Humanities Research Association, London, 1981, which is obtainable from academic booksellers and is available for consultation in the faculty library. This deals with such matters as spelling, abbreviations, punctuation, quotations, footnotes, references and other aspects of scholarly presentation.

Candidates are strongly advised to take great care over English grammar and style. Supervisors should not be expected to give time to correction of such matters. Their concern is properly with academic method and content. Simplicity and directness of style are desirable. Technical vocabulary, where it has to be used, should always be carefully explained so that examiners and other readers may know in what sense the writer is using it. Experience suggests that often a major reason for referral is poor presentation. Every care should be taken to ensure uniformity and accuracy of references.'

### 2. Extremely long sentences

In general, sentences should not be too long. They should be straightforward and concise. Dunleavy (2003) suggests that we should never write a sentence longer than 40 words, and that we should aim for an ideal sentence length of around 20 words. Whenever a sentence is more than 40 words long, we should always chop it up into two or three sentences. Where it is between 20 and 40 words, we should assess if it would be better split into two. Problems with long sentences usually reflect either the author writing inauthentically in a pompous style, or trying to do too many things within a single sentence.

<i>In spite of the fact that his name is mentioned in some "reliable" sources (Annales</i>
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<i>Cambriae, The Historia Brittonum or in writings of Gildas), his life still has been</i>
--

<i>keeping on an outgrowth of folklore and that is why some supernatural features</i>
---

<i>can be found in stories about King Authur.</i>
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A sentence should express a single thought or proposition, not multiple ones.

### 3. Incorrect choice of a word or a phrase

This aspect is closely connected with interference by the native language. That means that students very often use the words, which exist in English but with a different meaning. We call these words *false friends*.

<i>This problem is still actual.</i> (wrong)
<i>This problem is still <b>topical</b>.</i> (right)

Sometimes it is caused by intralingual transfer. This is overgeneralization, which means that the learner creates rules to process new language, based on evidence.

<i>It belongs to one of the most popular stories.</i> (wrong)
<i>It <b>is</b> one of the most popular stories.</i> (right)

#### 4. Punctuation

Among the most common punctuation symbols are full stops (UK)/ periods (US) and commas, which are connected with the basic function of the essay – and that is to inform the reader about some facts. Only the commas which are frequent and with which students very often make mistakes will be exemplified. Students usually lack commas:

- after a subordinate sentence, which proceeds the main clause,
- or after a front of a word or a group of words which add something to the main part of the sentence, usually the so-called adverbials, e.g. however, for instance, for example, finally, in my opinion, . . . .

<i>As we can see this is not the case with Shakespeare's Lear.</i> (wrong)
<i>As we can see, this is not the case with Shakespeare's Lear.</i> (right)
<i>According to some legends king Arthur was supposed to lead the defence of Britain against the Saxon invaders in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century.</i> (wrong)
<i>According to some legends, king Arthur was supposed to lead the defence of Britain against the Saxon invaders in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century.</i> (right)

On the other hand, they make a comma before the relative pronoun *that*, which in English is a very bad mistake, but in the Czech language it is a must.

<i>Some historians say, that some of his pieces could have been written by Francis Bacon.</i> (wrong)
<i>Some historians say that some of his pieces could have been written by Francis Bacon.</i> (right)

Another, very common mistake, consists in the use of quotation marks, which in English are always up, while in the Czech language are not.

<i>And that is why he is sometimes called the father of English" (wrong)</i>
<i>And that is why he is sometimes called "the father of English" (right)</i>

As a rule, this is caused either by their unfamiliarity with the English system of punctuation or again by a transfer from the Czech language.



## 5. Objectivity of one's work

Students like to make personal comments in the main part of their work; they usually use first person singular or *ich* form. However, this *ich* form is appropriate to use only in the in the Conclusion where they can express their comments on the contents of the paper. As Filka (2002) observes, the form of the monologue has to be objective. The presentation of one's statements should be described in the third person singular, arguments in the first person plural, opinions in the third person plural and introduction and conclusion in the first person singular.

<i>I can find there many autobiographical features. (wrong)</i>
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<u>One</u> can find there many autobiographical features. (right)
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Another common mistake is a lack of tentativeness – the so-called hedging – in students' writings. However, this aspect is not demonstrated here, as it would deserve an independent presentation.

## A New Approach to Teaching Writing

The Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove has been intensely involved in the application of e-learning in teaching since 1999 as its teachers continuously attempt to improve the quality of their teaching. E-learning namely enormously contributes towards increasing effectiveness and efficiency of educational process. E-learning started to be widely used at the faculty in 2001 when a few selected courses created in virtual learning environment WebCT (web communication tools) were introduced for part-time students (Semrádová, 2009). In 2002 these and other on-line courses, often called OLIVA (on-line teaching = On-Line VyukA), began to be used as a new quality support for full-time students as well. At present more than 150 e-courses are being fully exploited in teaching at the faculty. In English teaching more than 45 e-courses are being used. Some of them, such as *Teaching Written Business English*, can be taught completely on-line. However, most of them are blended as there are usually a few tutorials. One of the representative blended courses at the faculty is, for example, an optional one semester course on *Academic Writing*. The course exposes students to blended learning and thus makes use of students' IT skills and their life experience as "digital natives." That means they meet a teacher once in two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays), which together with a deeper self-study of the materials implemented in their on-line e-learning course, they write every second week. Students

usually have 5 assignments per semester. They are as follows: a summary of a lecture/ seminar; an argumentative essay without bibliographies and references; two essays including bibliographies and references and writing an entry for Wikipedia (see also Tardy, 2010). When students are creating an authentic article for Wikipedia from scratch, they are not only motivated to write but begin to recognize the usefulness and necessity of the formal writing aspects of their course, e.g. the importance of attending to errors and checking facts when writing to be published.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of the paper is to summarize some of the most common mistakes non-native students of English, in our case the Czech ones, make in writing a formal paper. It can help teachers to reflect on their students' writings and teach some of the above-mentioned aspects to improve students' formal written speech and, consequently, also their oral competence. Ob-

viously, a fruitful discussion on the comparison of different cultural writing backgrounds and further research in this area is needed. However, the above analysis of students' writings might be of interest to authors of teaching materials. It should be also emphasized that Czech students have a lack of experience in writing and therefore the level of their writing is often very poor. This is particularly true for higher education. Thus, the introduction of blended learning into the writing classes can be a solution towards a sustainable development of the writing skills.

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