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TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING AS A METHOD OF IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract: *Writing for academic purposes should be a compulsory topic in any academic institutions that usually provide students with courses and modules devoted to the acquisition of Academic Writing Skills. Teaching about Academic Writing is not an easy task as it calls for some prerequisites. Among these we could mention a good command of the English language. Academic environments nowadays use the English language as the lingua franca, that is the medium to communicate. That would require, besides the above-mentioned excellent command of the English language, a broad perspective on how knowledge and information are shared in international academic contexts. Being culturally aware, a researcher would try to get their message across in such a way that their written texts would be as objective as possible, being emptied of any cultural features (that have in view the researcher's cultural background). Nonetheless, the purpose of this paper is to show how academic writing may be regarded as another form of communication, this approach seeming to be a more effective one for students' understanding of the problem. Writing is a complex process that requires special training. Looking at this problem from this perspective may actually make it easier for students to understand the basic principles of academic writing and, at the same time to realize that, by the end of the learning process they may become better communicators. Mastering good academic writing skills definitely shapes the way in which communicate in a beneficial way. Academic writing is about being able to share knowledge and information in a concise, logical way, being always aware of the progression of the argument and being able to adapt to any environment or audience.*

Keywords: *academic writing, communication skills, intercultural communication, English as lingua franca, foreign language teaching.*

Writing is a complex process that normally comes in language after we learn to speak. Undoubtedly writing is another form of communication that requires special skills that need to be acquired as they do not come automatically in language. Being a productive skill, writing comes after some training in this respect. As Umberto Eco said, academic writing does not necessarily mean the transfer of some rules to our students as "if there were exhaustive rules,

we would all be great writers" (Eco 2005). Still, with practice, and getting to know some important details that are involved in the actual process of producing a written text for academic purposes, our students, may discover the way to becoming proficient not only in writing, but also in communicating in various environments. Academic writing is the highest level of proficiency in writing skills and the aim of this paper is to show how teaching about academic skills is linked to improving one's communication skills. Learning about academic writing skills indeed requires special skills, but looking at this important chapter of the academic curricula, from a different perspective, may allow us to discover a more effective approach for a student's training. All academic institutions probably have entire modules devoted to the acquisition of academic writing skills. They are supposed to familiarize students with the process of writing for academic purposes, from application forms to dissertations and long essays (Doctoral Schools affiliated to universities may also provide doctoral students with modules on how to write a PhD thesis): "The primary purpose of universities and other research-oriented institutions is to transfer and disseminate knowledge. While students write to explore topics and become familiar with what is known about them, it is the duty of every scientist to share any new findings with the scientific community, in an effort to advance the existing "knowledge pool." In this way, the writing produced in the academic setting aims to educate the next generation of scientists" (Joubert 2015). Thus, if we try to look at academic writing as another form of communication, we may obtain a more effective way to deal with the topic and students may have a better response to this approach.

First and foremost, writing for academic purposes requires a good command of the English language. No matter the academic field, English has become the lingua franca of international scholars. If researchers want to make their work visible, they need to present the results of their work in the English language. We wouldn't be wrong in saying, therefore, that nowadays academic writing is not for everyone, as the good command of the English language is a must. This would be the first level of improving one's communication skills. Mastering a foreign language is already a step forward in broadening one's perspectives: "Clearly, to know a language as your mother tongue makes it easier for you to write a professional text. Native speakers do not usually have to make an effort to find the right expression or phrase and therefore save much time when writing a scientific paper. However, being overly familiar with a language may predispose them to casual and colloquial formulations, and occasionally, even native speakers are prone to careless use of words, expressions, and punctuation marks" (Joubert 2015). As we have already said, academic writing skills would require the highest level of proficiency which is equivalent to that stage in which the user can understand language in context, that is in the cultural background where that language is produced. Understanding a language, i.e. being proficient in that specific language, means understanding its whole culture, being aware that everything we may say or write, every gesture we may make, will carry with it cultural features. Nonetheless, one may be entitled to say that in international contexts, as English has come to be used, all the non-native speakers are going to use a language that has been emptied of any cultural elements. In these contexts, English is just a medium of communication to share knowledge and information. This is definitely true, but there are two perspectives here that need to be discussed. On the one hand it is the actual academic writing a researcher needs to produce and that would require all the above-mentioned skills that situate the user above the average learner of General English. On the other hand, we discuss here the user's level of understanding that the effective command of a foreign language implies a cultural feature. In such a context, where academics from different cultural backgrounds meet to exchange knowledge and information, it is not as much about the cultural background of the English language, but rather about the user's cultural background. If we are aware of the presence of the cultural element in language, then, automatically, we understand that we also display cultural elements of our native backgrounds as we try to communicate. In a way, being

culturally aware, we have to be able to find, as we communicate with others with whom we do not share the same cultural background, that "third place" (Kramsch 1993) that was so nicely described by Claire Kramsch in her work *Context and Culture in Foreign Language Teaching*. This "third place" (Kramsch 1993) is defined as the shared place where two interlocutors, coming from different cultural backgrounds, meet in order to make communication possible. Overcoming one's cultural barriers could only make this type of communication possible.

Speaking a foreign language is a step forward towards achieving intercultural communication skills. Most of the specialists in the field of communication emphasized the fact that a good intercultural communicator is an individual who knows himself / herself. Self-awareness is probably the key skill that determines all the others: empathy, power of integration, tolerance, adaptability, certainty, acceptance and initiative (Jandt 2010). This is equally valid for developing good academic writing skills. There are ever more specialists in the field who start to underline how important it is for a researcher to develop their emotional intelligence. In scientific fields, "the development of EQ-related skills can allow individuals to effectively communicate with colleagues, supervisors, patients, and the general public. Importantly, one should remember, whatever weaknesses or strengths one possess in this area, they can be improved upon and learned with significantly positive results" (Buerger 2020). Consequently, a culturally aware person will also be endowed with a high EQ (emotional intelligence) and will be able to better manage communication in international contexts. Another important aspect that should be underlined here is that academic writing should not be seen as limited only to written texts. Most of the times before results are published, researchers present their results and progress in meetings and conferences. This is another important link between oral and written communication. Thus, no matter if we speak about oral or written communication, a researcher has to be aware of the fact that their cultural background will be reflected in their produced work. They may appear as insignificant details, but as they gather, coming from different areas, may affect the way in which communication is produced and information shared. The very use of methodologies may differ from one cultural context to another. Likewise, the use of data and terminology or the way in which the progression of the argument is supported may differ, therefore a researcher has to be aware of all these details once they decide to participate in such international meetings. Getting familiarized with all these aspects would require the analysis of some samples of other researchers' works (preferably the works of native speakers of the English language) and an effective communication with the supervisor (the existence of a supervisor in this context may be understood as these being the challenges of a young researcher, at the beginning of their career). For that, good communication skills are also required. Not being able to speak up their needs, young researchers may end up failing to do their work.

Students should also be prepared how to face the challenges of a fellowship in a different academic environment as the relationship with a supervisor is also culturally dictated. Some countries, like Romania, which experienced years of communism, may be more familiar with a more authoritative supervisor, while Western societies may give more freedom to a young researcher. This would be a complex situation that would still require good communication skills. Issues may find an answer provided the young researcher is able to speak them up and find the appropriate and balanced way to reduce stress and anxiety so as to take care of the research that has to be carried out. All technical details have to be understood, including the tone and voice in academic writing. Terminology has to be used in an appropriate way. No matter if we speak about the field of exact sciences, there are so many instances when one could see that technical words may be perceived with a different meaning. Authors need to be able to understand everything that refers to data, numbers, percentages, the use of facts, foreign words, the ways in which bibliographies are written and so on. Such elements should not be that difficult to acquire as academic writing is all about being concise, avoiding an

overcomplicated style that would impede understanding especially in international contexts where readers / participants come from different cultural backgrounds. Academic institution should provide students with useful information regarding the approach of the academic style which is very different from the usual writing style. Nowadays our students could easily find information in this respect if they go online. But teachers / supervisors should remind them the importance of careful access of information as not all sources may present such knowledge in the most accurate way. Teachers and supervisors may choose to suggest useful online sources that their students can check and such additional information could be of much benefit. A good example in this respect is the website offered by the University of Melbourne which offers a good frame of reference for academic writing. The site also offers online courses for international students who are guided in this journey by specialists from this university. On the above-mentioned site, students will learn that "Academic English is a distinct language" (https://students.unimelb.edu.au/academic-skills/resources/developing-an-academic-writing-style) , which is true, but, along with that, students may understand how to identify, create and improve their academic style. The site is carefully designed to offer information in several areas, starting with English language development (English language skills, vocabulary and grammar, reading and writing, speaking and listening) and going on with developing Academic writing skills. This sector is thoroughly covered, discussing many aspects related to the problem, including the way in which students may develop an academic writing style, along with originality (which is an important issue), but also tips on working with a supervisor. At this point it is important to understand that the writing process is a complex one that requires a lot of training and the discussing of some topics that cover many areas, from the formal aspect of language, along with all its mechanics, up to the final stage of the publication: "The main goal of scientific writing is to inform: a) to communicate your results and conclusions to others working in your field, b) to record what you have done, so others can check your work and evaluate your results and conclusions, and c) to educate those who are getting started in your field or working in related fields. This last point is important; it is not enough for other experts in your specific area of interest to understand your text. Well-written scientific texts present complex information in a way that enables relatively knowledgeable readers to understand it as easily as possible. Efficient organization and impeccable mechanics are fundamental to this task, but a series of other principles must also be applied to ensure clarity and comprehension" (Giba 2014).

A course on academic writing as a form of communication, may be developed taking into account several directions. One would have in view the academic vocabulary as such, focusing on the most important parts of speech, the way in which they combine in academic texts. Teachers should have in view here all the aspects of grammar that may be different in the students' mother tongue. As even word order, in academic texts, may be a form of displaying the author's cultural background. That would not be a problem if it did not affect the general aspect of the written text. Here teachers should also bring into attention all the mechanics of the language, grammar (the formal aspect of language), punctuation, spelling, capitalization. Likewise it is important for students to be able to choose the most appropriate term when in comes to academic writing. Clarity, as Michael Alley put it, starts from the author's choice of a specific word: "Einstein's advice to keep the language as simple as possible, yet no simpler, calls for a balance between being precise and being clear. Foremost, your scientific writing has to be precise. Otherwise, you are not communicating the work. While being precise requires you to convey what you mean, clarity calls on you to avoid things that you do not mean. Achieving this balance begins with choosing the right word" (Alley 2018). Therefore some practical activities to show them how relevant some words may be in the context they are using them. The problem of agreement between the subject and the predicate should also be discussed, along with all the changes we are allowed to make in an

English sentence (which has a strict word order) to make it sound as elegant (academic) as possible. Examples in this respect would have in view the way in which we can reduce a whole attributive clause to an adjective, making sure we insert the adjective in front of the noun it determines. Other examples of such constrictions would include the adverbials that could be inserted in between the subject and the predicate, paying attention to compound predicates that may behave differently. The choice of the right tenses could also be a challenge for a non-native speaker, the same way in which the active or passive voice may be favored in different contexts.

The next stage would be that in which the focus will be transferred to the actual research, the necessary steps that have to be taken to go through the initial stages of gathering information. This would later make up the theoretical chapter of the dissertation. Literature review should be regarded as another way of improving someone's communication skills as the ultimate result of such a task is to filter all the information we gather through our own perspective and explaining it in our own words. An excellent example of how students may improve their way of expressing themselves. Reading the specialized literature in the field would require us to talk about other people's ideas and then reporting what others have said. At this point students may also be able to provide a good analysis of what they have been reading, talking about other people's points of view and, gradually, formulate their own opinions on the topic. This process is a very complex one and is based on many article and book reviews that do not need to be summary of that the student / researcher has read, but rather an objective account combined with their own interpretation and understanding of what gives validity to this theory. This thinking process allows the researcher to develop a logical way of processing information, an ability that will become helpful when presenting their own argument. The presentation of an argument should be coherent, following a logical way. Throughout this presentation researchers have to come with supporting evidence to illustrate their points of view. These undoubtedly improve one's way of thinking, processing the information and understanding of problems by and large.

Throughout the research process, many fellow scholars will choose to publish some interim results or present their findings in international conferences. At this point another challenge that should be considered is that of making an abstract for a future paper that will be published or the presentation for an international conference. Publishing results is a compulsory thing, as Pieter Joubert has put it, "publishing data in medical and scientific journals is the most important means of communicating research results, both in the academic and commercial settings. In either environment, authors are faced with the main three questions, namely, why they wish to publish, what journal should be chosen, and how they are going to unveil their scientific *story*. While the reason for publishing in the commercial setting is usually connected with marketing strategies, academic publishing primarily aims to advance scientific and medical knowledge" (Joubert 2015). Developing an abstract is a real challenge as, in order to be accepted as a conference participant or contributing author, a researcher has to be able to select the useful information that is supposed to be understood by everyone, and, at the same time, to show the relevance of discussing that specific topic. It is not an easy task and it requires a great deal of analytical thinking. Likewise, the selection of a title is equally important as it has to convey the whole message you want to address, in an impactful way. Many specialists who have discussed this topic also mentioned the problem of targeting the audience. The researcher has to be a versatile individual, able to adapt to any needs of an audience they may not be familiar with. In other words, before the actual writing of a dissertation or thesis, a researcher will need to know to whom they will be addressing. Based on this important detail, they will be able to shape the whole format of their presentation / thesis. We can see thus who the audience plays an important role not only in oral communication settings, but also in the context of writing: "Your target audience may vary greatly. For example, the audience may

include employees of regulatory authorities (with varying backgrounds in terms of scientific and/or medical training), ethics committees (which usually include lay members, people with legal background, scientists, and clinicians), or journal editors and reviewers. It is imperative to consider the background of the target audience in choosing the appropriate style of language and the use and explanation of scientific and clinical terminology" (Joubert 2015). Being able to adapt to different styles and genres is thus another important goal of a researcher, that still has something to do with the idea of getting one's message across, i.e. making yourself understood: "In engineering and science, a host of different documents exists with a wide range of lengths—from one-page letters applying for jobs to multivolume tomes assessing contamination for a site's air, water, and soil. In addition, documents in scientific writing vary widely in the style—from the cohesive paragraphs of a white paper to the itemized lists in a set of specifications. In the end, though, how you write each document depends on your analysis of the audience, purpose, and occasion" (Alley 2018). Needless to say that when it comes to presentations, good communication skills are required. In international settings we have to be aware of the combination of all the components of the communication process, from verbal and nonverbal communication up to paralanguage, active listening and cultural awareness. Though the presentation will rely on a written text that has been produced in order to be published, the language the presenter is going to use will have to be adapted to the requirements of oral communication. Getting to know the audience will also help the presenter in organizing their material and speech. With the experience of pandemic we have started to develop additional skills in this respect. Face-to-face presentations were replaced, for a while, by virtual presentations that required a slightly different style. After the pandemic, some conferences or scientific events have kept a hybrid format so it is still worth practicing skills for the online medium.

Getting ready to publish one's research is not that difficult once everything is ready. One of the biggest advantages of the written text is that it can be reviewed until the author is satisfied with every detail. Most of the times, journals or publishing houses have their editorial and technical requirements that have to be followed to the letter in order for a written text to be accepted. Nonetheless, the process of peer review may come with their challenges. It is rarely that a researcher's contribution is accepted without some changes to be required. The difficulty comes when major changes are required and the author may have to re-think the entire process. It is up to the researcher to decide whether they want to go on with the process or if it is worth looking for a different journal / publishing house that would accept their written material. Being able to communicate with the editorial staff and follow their indications to the letter is, usually, the best choice. Coping with rejection may be another challenge, but that can be easily overpassed once the researcher may realize that more work has to be done or, as stated above, some other times it may be about looking for a different journal or publishing house as, very likely, the respective situation may be because they are looking for different types of printed materials. Overcoming such barriers is still connected to the possibilities of the researcher to communicate and cope with peer review.

Last but not least, another form of communication that still relates to academic writing is the researcher's presence in the online medium. The effectiveness of such a presence was an acknowledged thing even before the pandemic, so this is not necessarily a new topic to bring into discussion. Nowadays researchers find it useful to share information with larger audiences (it was also the pandemic which taught us the importance of having all things explained by specialists in the field – false information used to travel fast and the immediate consequences were the misinformation of the people). The online medium, no matter what forms it takes, blogging, social media platforms, requires the same power to adapt to various audiences. Once a researcher chooses to have an online presence, their decision, in terms of to whom they are going to address the message, they have to respond to the needs of that specific audience. Their

power of communication can be seen exactly here, in the way they can address complex topics to a variety of audiences, from other experts in the field to larger audiences who are not scientists. The role of such a scholar / academic is, up to a certain extent, that of making complex things easy to understand. Hence, complex information becomes accessible and the ultimate result is that people will be better informed on important topics.

Academic writing can, therefore, be looked at from this perspective of being another form of communication that helps us grow and develop towards becoming better communicators by and large. Possessing academic writing skills means developing analytical thinking, having the power to express ideas in a concise and logical manner, but also the ability to adapt to the needs of various audiences, getting one's message across. Developing well-designed academic courses for our students is a real opportunity to increase their awareness of owing communication skills. These are going to help them in any field of activity, making them aware of the things they want to say, arguing with reasoning and being able to adapt to any challenging communication patterns they might find themselves in. Our students may not all become scholars and researchers, focused on developing a career in the academic environment, but, no matter where they are going to carry out their professional activities, having these skills, they will be able to communicate more effectively.

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