Online Reading and Writing in English for Specific Purposes Classes

Galina Kavaliauskienė, Lilija Anusienė

Abstract. At tertiary level students face demanding tasks of reading an enormous amount of professional materials in English. Writing various assignments is another challenging part of higher education. Online activities are the priority for conducting assignments at university level.

University students usually start doing the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course before learning subject-matters of the future profession, i.e. in their first year. The cornerstone of the ESP is unfamiliar lexis and numerous concepts of subject-matter. In order to succeed, students need to develop proficiency in reading professional texts and writing skilfully on relevant subject issues.

The aim of this paper is to investigate, first, learners' attitudes to reading professional materials and writing various assignments online and, second, learners' self-assessment of proficiency in these skills.

Research employed brief written surveys designed in accordance with the standards in Social Sciences, which were administered to the students doing the ESP course, and the verbal data obtained during individual interviews intended to assess learners' success and achievements throughout the academic year.

The respondents were the students specializing in psychology at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, Lithuania. All the participants were unanimous in the importance of writing and reading skills for the ESP tasks. 100 % of respondents support reading professional materials, and 80 % of respondents support exercising online writing. Self-assessment of reading proficiency demonstrate that 90 % of students believe they possess very good or good skills of reading, and 70 % of learners are sure of their good skills of writing. Respondents' performance in these skills is less impressive.

The paper describes some recommendations that aim at perfecting students' proficiency in "read-to-write" assignments. It is urgent to help learners to develop better rates of reading and learn to employ metacognitive strategies in writing.

Key words: online "read-to-write-tasks", attitudes to reading/writing skills, self-assessment of reading/writing skills, English for Specific Purposes.

Introduction

The proficiency in different language skills is very important to university students, who have to cover the enormous amount of reading materials and write numerous assignments.

In the course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), students face demanding tasks of learning subject-matter through English. The cornerstone of ESP is unfamiliar lexis and subject-matter concepts. In order to succeed, students need to develop proficiency in reading and writing. The access to high-tech allows learners to perform reading and writing online and keep improving their performance by editing their own work.

Reading and writing are interrelated skills not only in general language but also in ESP and should be exercised together. The novelty of this study is an application of Information and Communication Technology to the ongoing online reading of professional materials at student's own pace and at their own convenience time followed by downloading written summaries or essays in the weblogs, which can be viewed and read by any member of the Internet users.

This paper addresses, first, students' attitudes to reading and writing online and, second, to self-evaluation of proficiency in these skills. The investigation aimed at gathering verbal and written data from the students at university and making informed decisions what techniques can help to improve performance in reading and writing.

The aims of the research: to investigate learner attitudes to online reading of professional materials and writing various assignments, i.e. "read-to-write-tasks" and to assess their proficiency of reading/writing skills in the ESP classes.

The research methods used: a survey of learner perceptions and the data of verbal interviews intended to find out learner self-assessment of success and achievements in the ESP assignments.

The intended outcome is to provide recommendations on developing "read-to-write-tasks" skills.

Review of literature

Some background information on reading and writing is reviewed below.

Reading

There seems to be no extensive research into efficiency of reading skills in the L2. The common sense suggests that this issue in the second language must be understood through the acquisition of literacy in the first language. In other words, it involves

> "the fundamental psycholinguistic issue of transfer of the abilities that enable L2 learners to utilize knowledge from one language in acquiring literacy in another" (Carson, 1994).

The investigation of connections between receptive and productive skills in the L2 needs theoretical, experiential and experimental foundation. English language teachers are well aware of the qualitative dependence: well-read learners are better speakers and writers, and better literacy in the mother tongue helps developing literacy skills in the second language. Reading is known to be a complex cognitive activity, and teaching reading skills presents some difficulties. Length of words and sentences in written texts is one of the key difficulties – longer sentences and longer words are more difficult to understand.

Authenticity of reading materials presents serious difficulty to students because no concessions are made to foreign learners who encounter non-simplified content (Harmer, 2001). Moreover, reading authentic materials can be extremely de-motivating for students, and negative expectations of reading are often due to previous unsuccessful experiences.

There are various ways of addressing the problem of language difficulty. The most common are pre-teaching difficult or unfamiliar lexis, encouraging learners to read extensively, to train learners in intensive reading, and to teach reading strategies. Skimming and scanning are useful first stages for developing reading skills, when a reader decides whether to read a text at all or which parts to read carefully. To develop an independent reader, a number of other strategies like inferring, summarizing, checking and monitoring students' comprehension, connecting information from different parts of the text, evaluating and fault-finding are necessary. These strategies involve deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups as well as implications, i.e. not explicitly stated information, conceptual meaning, understanding relationship in the text structure and parts of a text through lexical-grammatical cohesion devices and indicators in discourse, distinguishing facts from opinions.

In the teaching of reading, grammar is often ignored because of many misconceptions about the role of grammar. According to Dudley Evans et al. (1998), "in reading, the learners' grammatical weaknesses interfere with comprehension of meaning". Alderson (1995) showed that

> "poor reading in a foreign language is due to in part to poor reading in the L1, together with an inadequate knowledge of the foreign language. Learners need to reach a threshold level of language knowledge before they are able to transfer any L1 skills to their L2 reading tasks".

The fundamental process involved in the second language learning is transfer between L1 and L2 literacy skills (Carson, 1994). Transfer of skills is not automatic, but training students in learning reading strategies can facilitate transfer.

Writing

An increased professional concern in teaching writing skills has manifested itself by a number of publications in this area since the 1980s. Issues related to the teaching of writing and to the research findings on the writing of non-native speakers are of a particular interest to linguists and teachers, who claim that one of the most valuable and essential skills is the ability to write accurately, briefly and clearly. There is an obvious link between reading and writing: they are interdependent and reciprocal processes, both are personal and social activities, which naturally intersect in the process of learning (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

It is claimed that "knowledge of genre is a key element in all communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts" (Dudley-Evans et al., 1998). Developing writing skills involves skills of planning, drafting and revising so that the end product is appropriate both to the purpose of the writing and the intended readership. Moreover, "writing is a difficult and tiring activity and usually needs time for reflection and revision, plus a peaceful environment, none of which are generally available in the classroom".

The productive skill of writing differs from productive skill of speaking. Writing has to be both coherent and cohesive; coherent writing makes sense because you can follow the sequence of ideas and points. Cohesion is a more technical matter since here we concentrate on the various linguistic ways of connecting ideas across phrases and sentences (Harmer, 2001). There are certain conventions that have to be followed in writing. It means that a different level of formality is used depending on the context. There are a number of reasons why students find language production difficult: students do not have the minimum language to perform a task; there is no spontaneity in writing; the topic or genre might create some difficulties. Furthermore, conventions in one's native language are frequently non-transferable to a second language (ibid, p.202).

The ability to summarize a text is important part of good writing skills. In education summarizing is invaluable: learners have to sum up reading assignments, lecture notes, articles, etc. on a daily basis. The ability to write an effective summary might be the most important writing skill. Students need to be able to summarize before they can be successful at the other kinds of writing. The goal of summarizing is an accurate and concise presentation of the original's key points and ability to generalize. Some learners assume that summarizing a text is a relatively easy task, but essentially it is not, basically because writing involves some complex abilities. Reading comprehension is one of the necessary abilities. In our previous reseach into reading-writing relationships in ESP by students who studied law and penitentiary activities, three important facts emerged: learners' reading rates are low, both writing

and reading involve translating ideas from L1 (or L2) into L2 (or L1), but no statistical correlation between reading and writing skills has been found (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

Summing up writing strategies in higher education, reader needs to be able to use adequate reading strategies and must thoroughly understand a text, in particular the links between ideas, be able to paraphrase key points, make necessary generalizations and describe accurately key points. Summarizing demands from students the ability to select information. This involves decision taking on how important or unimportant the facts are, and generalize and reorganize information. Common writing mistakes include poor organization, lengthy sentences and words, inadequate content, inconsistent usage, poor page layout, repetition, plagiarism, lack of structure and various grammatical mistakes.

Research methods and respondents

In this work, students' reported verbal data (through interviews) or written data (surveys) were investigated. Research employed brief surveys, which were designed in accordance with the accepted standards for questionnaires in Social Sciences (Dörnyei, 2003). Questionnaires were administered to all respondents, and the analysis of responses was conducted. Verbal data emerge as a useful research tool, although in some cases certain caution may be required because students may report what they believe the teacher wants to hear.

The participants were 60 students specializing in psychology at Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius, and studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). They were predominantly females at the intermediate English levels. The amount of time spent by students in L2 environment was 4 hours per week for 2 semesters, which amounts to about 120 hours of English instruction.

Results and discussion

Attitudes to proficiency in reading and writing

The attitudes to proficiency in different aspects of language were examined by administering a specially designed questionnaire. In this part of the paper, only the data relevant to the research in question are presented. Three ranking preferences – unimportant, not sure and important – were offered as assessment of proficiency significance. The students' responses are shown in percentage in Table 1. Percentage is regarded as a tangible way of presenting statistical results.

Table 1. Attitudes to proficiency in reading and writing skills. The respondents – 60 students of psychology

Skill: **Reading**	Unimportant	Not sure	Important
ESP texts	-	-	100 %
Newspapers	15 %	25 %	60 %
Books	40 %	10 %	50 %
Skill: **Writing**			
Summaries	10 %	10 %	80 %
Essays	10 %	20 %	70 %
Weblog entries	5 %	15 %	80 %

It is seen that majority of students are unanimous in the importance of ESP skills such as reading professional texts

(100 %) and writing summaries and weblog entries (80 %). However, the respondents do not seem to be very interested in reading newspapers or books – 60 % and 50 %, respectively. Some clarifications of the findings have come from the individual interviews at the end of each semester. In their interviews, students usually claim they do not have much spare time or interest for reading either newspapers or books and they do not enjoy writing activities, but feel they have to do their written assignments which are beneficial in the preparation for the exam at the end of the ESP course. Major leisure activities include listening to music or socializing with friends. Learning is not regarded as fun, though.

Self-assessment of proficiency in reading and writing

In this study, students were requested to evaluate their reading and writing skills by giving themselves a grade. These results are shown in Chart 1.
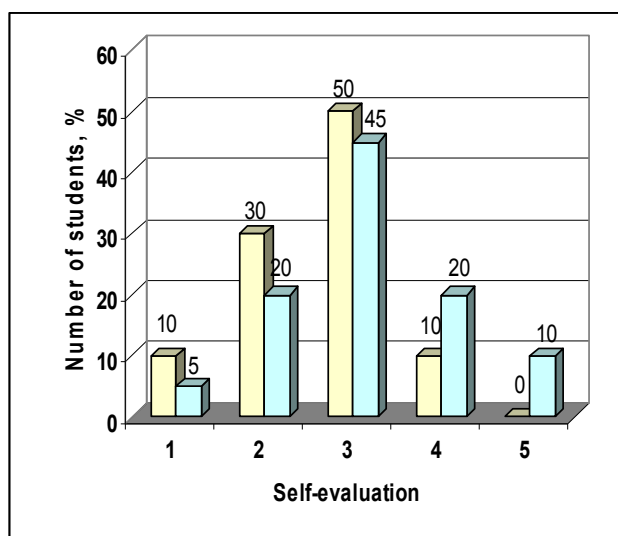

Chart 1. Self-assessment of reading and writing proficiency

First bars show self-assessed competence in reading proficiency. Second bars show self-assessed competence in writing proficiency. The meaning of numbers in X axis is: 1 – excellent, 2 – very good, 3 – good, 4 – satisfactory, 5 – weak.

Chart 1 demonstrates how students grade their performance in reading – first columns, and in writing – second columns. All in all, 90 % of students evaluate their reading quite well: 10 % of students believe it is excellent, 30 % – very good, and 50 % – good. Only 10 % of students think their reading skill is satisfactory. The evaluation of writing skill is not so good. Nevertheless, 70 % of students assess it good enough: 5 % – excellent, 20 % – very good, and 45 % – good. The rest 30 % of students evaluate their writing skills as either satisfactory or weak.

Performance in reading tests

This aspect of study aimed at establishing links between self-evaluation data and the real facts, in other words, student's performance in reading and writing activities. For this purpose, proficiency in reading was estimated which allows to shed light on the issue. In order to measure the reading efficiency it is necessary to introduce a standard of value – a reading rate or reading speed. The reading rate is

a good measure of ability to process information and is defined as a number of words read per minute. However, reading rate does not provide information about understanding contents of the read materials. Reading comprehension can serve as a measure and it is usually checked by administering questions of various formats, e.g. multiple-choice, true-false, open-ended questions, etc.

As a lead-in, a reading test that is available online at the website <http://www.ReadingSoft.com> has been employed. It can be used by anyone who wishes to assess his/her ability to read and understand a text of average difficulty. The participants were requested to read the text and do the exercises. The procedure is quite fast and straightforward. Students click the Start button and start reading a text. The button starts the timer. As soon as they finish reading they click the Stop button. This will stop the timer and displays their reading speed. After this, respondents do the comprehension test, i.e. answer multiple choice questions about the text they have just read. By the end, student's performance is evaluated electronically. Typical reading rates give a general idea of reading efficiency and are presented below. According to the above website's copyright owners, research shows that reading is about 25 % slower from a computer screen than from the paper. Further, reader profiles are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Reader profiles (<http://www.ReadingSoft.com>)

Reading on screen	Reading on paper	Comprehension	Reader profile
100 wpm*	110 wpm	50 %	Insufficient
200 wpm	240 wpm	60 %	Average reader
300 wpm	400 wpm	80 %	Good reader
700 wpm	1000 wpm	85 %	Excellent reader

* words per minute

In our online experiment, students' reading rates were within the range between 100 words per min (wpm) and 150 wpm, and the comprehension level was between 50 % and 60 %. Therefore, according to Table 2, the respondents' profile is ranked as insufficient. It is worth mentioning that before doing this experiment, we evaluated students reading rates in their native language by giving them short professional texts to read and answer some comprehension questions. The findings were much better: reading rates in L1 varied between 200 wpm and 300 wpm and comprehension levels were around 70 %. This demonstrates that in their native language students' reading competence places them between average and good readers.

Keeping in mind that the text in the above mentioned online experiment is irrelevant to the students' ESP syllabus, we set a homework assignment. Students were requested to read a few ESP texts taken from the Modules in the coursebook "Understanding Psychology" by Robert S. Feldman as a homework task and to record the time they needed to complete the online comprehension questions (2009, <http://www.mhhe.com/feldmanup9>). Students' reported data were used to calculate their reading rates. The findings are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Reading rates in ESP assignments

Type of text	Average reading time (homework)	Number of students %	Reading rate (homework)	Reading aloud rate (in class)
Coherent, about 1000 words	0.5 hour	45 %	35 wpm	60 wpm
Coherent, about 1000 words	1 hour	35 %	16.7 wpm	30 wpm
Coherent, about 1000 words	1.5 hours	20 %	11.1 wpm	20 wpm

The results in Table 3 show that reading ESP materials at home is rather slow. 45 % of learners read at the rate of 35 words per minute, 35 % – at 16.7 wpm, and 20 % – at 11.1 wpm. In order to find some reliable information why the homework reading rates are rather slow, an experiment of reading aloud was set up. Students were requested to read ESP excerpts of similar difficulty for 1 minute loudly. Reading rates were determined by calculating the number of read words. The average data on reading aloud are shown in the fifth column of Table 3. It is obvious that in the last task the performance is almost twice faster.

Naturally, these results pose two questions. First, why the values of reading rates are rather small, and second, why students self-assess their reading proficiency as good or very good, but it is not up to the standards.

One of the possible answers is that in homework assignments students have to carry out some comprehension exercises and they may use bilingual dictionaries for looking up the meanings of unfamiliar words, which is a time-consuming and slows down the reading. This assumption has been confirmed by students' self-reported accounts. Moreover, in their interviews, students revealed that homework reading has rarely been a non-stop procedure due to various distractions, e.g. phone calls, visits, breaks for meals, etc., so fixing the time spent on reading may not be accurate. Apart from that, some learners admit that reading is hindered by unfamiliar vocabulary, lexical phrases, textual organization, and sentence structure.

The answer to the question why students over-evaluate their reading competence might be that shortcomings in reading are easier to conceal than faults in other language skills. It is assumed that learners perceive reading as a passive procedure consisting of using their eyesight to follow a line after line in a text and ignoring important components of cognition and comprehension. Moreover, it is known that the cognitive processing of information is slower in a foreign language and it hinders immediate retention of information. This fact is described by Cook (2007):

"cognitive processes work less efficiently through the second language. L2 learners have 'cognitive deficits' with reading that are not caused by lack of language ability but by difficulties with processing information in L2".

Performance in writing

Writing has always been considered as a very important and difficult skill in learning English. Writing activity compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas and includes student abilities to analyze, criticize and summarize what they have read. However students find composing in English difficult because the writing process demands to use various strategies such as cognitive, linguistic, logical, and critical. Our students in their interviews, similarly as students elsewhere (Rao, 2007), keep complaining that they lack ideas and cannot think of anything interesting or significant to write. In practice, students feel miserable as soon as they face a task of writing an essay or summary. The most common student complaint is 'I do not even know how/what to write in my mother tongue – it is impossible for me to describe it in English'. Such statements seem to reveal lack of literacy in the L1.

Student written work may be viewed in their weblogs which are uploaded in the website (Kavaliauskienė, <http://gkaval.home.mruni.eu>) in the section "Studentų darbai". The usual contributions include summaries of ESP texts and essays on various subject-matter themes. It is worth noting that entries of students who studied either social work or law and penitentiary activities can also be viewed and compared with contributions written by students of psychology. It is worth noting that the quality of written work depends on student general proficiency. Summaries are usually written in accordance with common requirements to academic writing, while essays often consist of compilations of either online or coursebook materials. References to other people's ideas or printed materials are not always included in spite of gentle reminders to avoid plagiarism.

Similarly as our students in ESP, students in English for Academic Purposes programmes face considerable challenges in "reading-to-write-tasks" (Evans, 2008), because expository texts present a number of difficulties, such as language structures, specialized vocabulary, and new concepts. The depth of cognitive processing by the reader is of key importance in the process of comprehension. The successful reading needs the activation of metacognitive reading strategies, i.e. deciding important points, summarizing, making inferences, asking questions (Allen, 2003). The difficulties posed by "reading-to-write-tasks" are demanding: students are required to analyse, summarize and present critical opinions on the ideas contained in the text.

With the view of improving reading vs writing skills, two approaches seem to be beneficial. One is training students in brainstorming major points in expository texts including the contents and layouts before writing assignments. Another approach is implementing extensive reading in an ESP programme. According to Macalister (2008), the inclusion of extensive reading was positively received by the learners in the English for Academic Purposes programme.

Conclusions

Students' self-assessment of reading and writing proficiency reveals that students grade their reading quite well: 10 % believe it is excellent, 30 % – very good, and 50 % – good. Measuring performance in reading tests has shown rather low reading rates, which might be due to the various interruptions in homework reading. Overall, students' overevaluation of reading competence might be because shortcomings in reading are easier to conceal than faults in other language skills. The quality of written work depends on students' general proficiency. In this research majority of students did their best in written assignments mainly because they were aware of writing not just for the teacher but for the wide Internet audience. It should be noted, however, that students face essential challenges in "reading-to-write-tasks" because of a number of difficulties, such as specialized vocabulary, language structures, register, and new concepts.

The following conclusions can be drawn. Aiming to perfect learner proficiency in reading/writing skills, first, students need to increase their reading rates. The idea of introducing extensive reading in the ESP programme might help students to succeed in reading faster and efficiently. Second, it might be beneficial to train learners in using metacognitive reading strategies with the view of teaching to distinguish important information from nonessential details and selecting the right register in "read-to-write tasks".

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Skaitymo ir rašymo įgūdžių ugdymas anglų kalbos pratybose

Santrauka

Specialybės anglų kalbos dėstymo patirtis liudija, kad lingvistinis studentų tobulėjimas priklauso nuo jų aktyvaus dalyvavimo asmeniškai planuojant mokymąsi, analizuojant mokymosi rezultatus ir numatant įgūdžių tobulinimo būdus. Skaitymo ir rašymo įgūdžių tobulinimas mokant anglų kalbos specialiesiems tikslams yra vienas iš universitetinių studijų tikslų. Studentai su specialiąja anglų kalba susipažįsta jau pirmaisiais mokslo metais, t. y. anksčiau nei su savo specialybės dalykais. Suprantama, kad norint gerai suprasti dėstomo dalyko esmę studentams tenka skaityti daug specialybės tekstų. Skaitymo įgūdžiai yra tiesiogiai susiję su rašymo įgūdžiais. Labai gerai išlavinti skaitymo įgūdžiai gimtąja kalba leidžia pasiekti gerų rašymo rezultatų. Taipogi, geri skaitymo įgūdžiai leidžia perkelti gimtosios kalbos skaitymo strategijas į užsienio kalbos skaitymo strategijas ir palengvinti rašymo mokymą.

Darbe nagrinėjamos problemos, kurios yra betarpiškai susijusios su specialybės anglų kalbos skaitymo ir rašymo mokymo tobulinimu. Tyrime naudotos apklausos anketos, skirtos išnagrinėti studentų požiūriui į skaitymo ir rašymo patirtį internete bei vertinti savo pasiekimus atliekant šias užduotis. Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad studentai aukštai vertina savo skaitymo įgūdžius nors objektyvūs rodikliai liudija tam tikrą savęs pervertinimo polinkį. Taip atsitinka dėl to, jog skaitymo spragos lengvai praslysta pro akis ir neįgudęs vertintojas jų gali nepastebėti. Tačiau rašymo įgūdžiai yra vertinami objektyviau, nes leksikos vartosena bei gramatinės struktūros kelia studentams nemažai problemų.

Yra pateikiama rekomendacija: studentams tikslinga išmokti didinti skaitymo spartą. Tuo tikslu pravers metakognityvinių skaitymo įgūdžių mokymas ir praktinis taikymas, kurie padeda suvokti svarbias profesinio teksto mintis ir gebėjimą atskirti neesminę informaciją nuo svarbios. Pastarasis įgūdis yra būtinas formuluojant teksto suvokimą raštu.

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