

Developing and assessing academic and professional writing skills – An introduction

Writing skills constitute one of the qualifications that are central both for academic and professional success. In an increasing number of occupational fields, degree programmes and disciplines, writing skills are not only required in one's mother tongue but also in English as the *lingua franca* of international communication. The observation that writing skills often do not develop to a sufficient extent if they are not fostered actively but rather considered a by-product of vocational or academic training has led to a number of initiatives such as, for example, the introduction of more process-oriented writing curricula, the establishment of writing centres as central support services at universities and the introduction of writing-intensive seminars in the disciplines. In higher education in Germany, a large number of writing centres and similar initiatives have been set up since 2011, when funding could be obtained for such measures from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in its "Quality Pact for Teaching" programme. This programme addresses the needs of increasingly higher proportions of age cohorts that enrol in university degree programmes (in the German state of Hesse more than 50% in 2012) and that, due to diverse educational backgrounds, come with rather heterogeneous entrance qualifications including writing skills.

Writing curricula which are tailored to students' specific needs cannot be developed without insight into the specific writing skills, for example, in terms of genre knowledge and languages, that these students will need in their education and training as well as their later professional lives. Furthermore, reliable assessment procedures are required which can be applied to determine what competencies students bring with them and can be considered the foundation for further skills development, as well as to evaluate whether writing curricula yield the expected results. Given the importance of writing skills both for learning and knowledge construction as well as for academic and professional success, applied linguistics is faced with the challenge of informing the development of writing courses and writing-

intensive seminars in the disciplines and contributing to the establishment of best practises of literacy development and assessment.

The present volume addresses the questions of how both academic and professional writing skills can be fostered under the conditions specified above and how writing skills development can be measured. These two central questions will be answered from three different perspectives reflected in the three parts of this volume: Part I “Vocabulary and terminology in academic writing”, which focuses on the lexical level; Part II “Complex writing competence constructs”, where a holistic perspective is taken trying to capture writing competence in all its complexity; and Part III “Subjective conceptions of writing and how to foster it”, which considers students’ subjective attitudes and beliefs on writing, which, as will be shown, have an impact on the acceptance of writing support. The methods employed in the studies reported on range from corpus-linguistic approaches via analytical and holistic assessment procedures to ethnographic studies. The writing assignments subjected to analysis range from seminar papers via personal portraits, letters of complaint and application to portfolios and statements on learning platforms. In the following, an overview of the structure of this volume and short summaries of each of the six contributions from four European countries, Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, will be provided.

Part I: Vocabulary and terminology in academic writing

The two contributions of Part I address corpus-based studies that focus on lexical and terminological aspects of L2 academic writing in the fields of a) business administration and b) the natural sciences and engineering.

In her article “Writing for specific purposes: Developing business students’ ability to ‘technicalize’”, **Christine S. Sing** (Vienna/Austria) investigates how advanced students of business administration elaborate on technical terms in their L2 English writing by means of defining, exemplifying and explaining, i.e., how they ‘technicalize’. For this purpose, she draws on a self-compiled specialized corpus, the corpus of Academic Business English (ABE), which comprises approximately one million tokens and was compiled from assessed university student writing on a broad thematic range of business topics. Christine Sing’s analyses focus on the challenge frequently encountered by ESP students that they may be familiar

with domain-specific concepts but lack the language resources necessary to appropriately embed them in their writing. Against this background, Sing pleads for a more effective orchestration of the teaching of subject-domain knowledge and the domain-specific language needed for communicating about it. This includes the necessity to firmly anchor professional genres in the relevant curricula, which should replace writing assignments, such as seminar papers, as they are often used as training texts. As she points out, the latter types of assignments “alienate students from the professional target genres” they are expected to be able to write in their later professional lives. Furthermore, she pleads for foregrounding the processual character of writing instead of misconstruing writing as a product.

Hans Malmström, Diane Pecorari & Magnus Gustafsson (Gothenburg & Växjö/Sweden) contribute to our understanding of what we may reasonably expect of English Medium Instruction (EMI) for the development of students’ English language proficiency. More specifically, their article “Coverage and development of academic vocabulary in assessment texts in English Medium Instruction” focuses on advanced students’ productive knowledge of English academic vocabulary at a technical university in Sweden where all degree programmes at graduate level use English as the medium of instruction. Drawing on a corpus comprising 80 texts (approximately 720,000 words) produced by Swedish and international Master of Science students in their first and second years of study, they set out to answer the following three research questions: 1. What is the lexical coverage of the students’ writing, i.e., what proportion of words in their texts is academic? 2. Are home students and international students comparable in terms of their productive academic vocabulary knowledge? And 3. Does students’ productive knowledge of academic words appear to develop during their studies? Their findings call the effectiveness of EMI for academic vocabulary development into question.

Part II: Complex writing competence constructs

Whereas the articles of Part I focus on one specific aspect of academic writing skills, lexical competence, Part II comprises two articles which address the assessment of professional and academic writing skills in a more encompassing manner.

In their article “Assessing writing in vocational education and training schools: Results from an intervention study”, **Liana Konstantinidou, Joachim Hoefele & Otto Kruse** (Winterthur/Switzerland) describe an assessment procedure they used to evaluate a process-oriented approach to writing instruction in vocational education and training (VET) schools introduced in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. This new approach to writing instruction includes both German as L1 and German as L2 approaches and was designed to more adequately cater to the diverse language needs in the multilingual, multi-ethnic vocational classroom than traditional product-oriented approaches. The article outlines the nature of the new approach to writing instruction and introduces the instruments used for the assessment of the students’ writing competence in a pre-test/post-test/control group design with follow-up measurement including the writing tests and scoring procedures. Their main results show a significant increase in writing competence in the experimental group as compared to the control group. The article concludes with a discussion of the value of their assessment procedure.

The construct of writing competence assessed in the pre-test/post-test study conducted by **Susanne Göpferich & Imke Neumann** (Giessen/Germany) and presented in their article “Writing competence profiles as an assessment grid? – Students’ L1 and L2 writing competences upon entering university and after one semester of instruction” is university students’ ability to express themselves in a formally and linguistically correct, cohesive, coherent and well-reasoned manner in a genre they are familiar with from their secondary education. The empirical basis of their analyses is formed by the argumentative essays that 61 students (26 in their L1 German and 35 in their L2 English) composed at the beginning and at the end of one-semester study skills academic writing courses in either their L1 German or their L2 English. These essays were subjected to both a (text-)linguistic error analysis and a holistic evaluation of their argumentative rigour yielding assessments in five areas: formal correctness, lexical correctness, syntactical correctness, text-linguistic correctness and argumentative rigour. The findings from both the beginning of the semester and the end of the semester are visualized in area charts, so-called writing competence profiles (WCP), which, against the background of dynamic systems theory, set individual writing sub-competencies in relation to each other. These WCPs

show characteristic patterns, which are assumed to provide insight into how the individual sub-competencies and their developments may be related to one another. The characteristic patterns suggest that WCPs, when available for a larger range of writing competence levels, may be usable as grids for the assessment of writing competence.

Part III: Subjective conceptions of writing and how to foster it

The two articles combined in Part III address the subjective conceptions that university students have of ‘ideal’ professional and academic writing processes and their beliefs of how their writing skills can be fostered.

In her contribution “Portfolios as a means of developing and assessing writing skills”, **Sandra Ballweg** (Bielefeld/Germany) explores a teacher’s and her engineering students’ actual use of a portfolio in the context of an academic writing course in German as a Foreign Language as well as their perception of this portfolio work. The empirical basis of the study is formed by 25 hours of audiotaped and transcribed lessons and portfolio conferences as well as interviews, four conducted with the teacher and three with each of seven participating students. Her objective is to reveal patterns of portfolio use and to generate hypotheses on the usefulness of portfolio work. The major hypothesis generated in this study through qualitative research methods relates to a gain-loss effect of portfolio use. The findings suggest that the introduction of portfolios in the writing classroom cannot just be viewed as an additional offer to the students and their learning but also necessitates abandoning established elements and procedures. Therefore, teachers have to make informed decisions as to both the focus of their teaching and the purpose of portfolio work. To enable them to do so, Ballweg pleads for preparing teachers for portfolio work and to support them in the process of employing it.

Acknowledging that students’ beliefs about writing and writing strategies may interfere with their acceptance of writing support and that it is therefore helpful for writing instructors to be aware of these beliefs, **Sabine Dengerscherz & Melanie Steindl** (Vienna/Austria) explore these beliefs using statements posted by students on a learning platform. In their article “‘Prepare an outline first and then just write spontaneously’ – An analysis of students’ writing strategies and their attitudes towards professional writ-

ing”, they provide insights into students’ attitudes towards planning and spontaneous writing, both for short assignments in non-academic genres and longer texts in academic writing. For this purpose, statements from 163 students were analysed, which were posted on the learning platform *Moodle* during four courses of the BA programme “Transcultural Communication” at the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Vienna. The courses were designed around writing in German as an L1 or L2. The results reveal numerous individual writing strategies and beliefs about writing between a ‘conscious craft’ and a ‘kiss-of-the-muse’ position. Students who take the ‘conscious craft’ position are keen to learn more about writing strategies, whereas students with the ‘kiss of the muse’ position doubt whether writing support might be helpful for them at all. The article discusses the didactical potential of online forum discussions about writing and how they can be integrated into writing classrooms.

We would like to thank all contributors for their excellent cooperation and hope that the present volume will give further impetus to the development of more student-centred approaches to professional and academic writing instruction and improved literacy assessment procedures.

We also wish to thank the German Association for Applied Linguistics (GAL) for funding the publication of this volume, as well as our peer reviewers for the expertise, time and effort that they invested into reviewing the articles of this volume and providing valuable suggestions for their optimization. We also wish to thank Lisa Beier for proof-reading all articles from the perspective of a native speaker, and the Peter Lang publishing team, especially Michael Rücker, for their excellent support in the publishing process. Furthermore, support is acknowledged from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), which has provided the funding for the establishment of the writing centre of Justus Liebig University, Giessen, in its “Quality Pact for Teaching” programme and thus also for staff that contributed to this volume.

Giessen, January 2016

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