



Research Papers in *Language Teaching and Learning*

Hellenic Open University
School of Humanities

Volume 10

February 2019

Written Assignments and Dissertations in Distance Learning within the TESOL Context

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P A T R A S



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2019, 9-20

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

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Greek students' views on academic writing in Distance Learning within the TESOL context

**Οι απόψεις των Ελλήνων φοιτητών σχετικά με την
ακαδημαϊκή γραφή στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση
στα πλαίσια της διδασκαλίας της Αγγλικής γλώσσας
σε ομιλητές άλλων γλωσσών**

Polyxeni MANOLI, Makrina ZAFIRI, Vasilios ZORBAS

The aim of this study was to explore the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a postgraduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) through a distance learning program at the Hellenic Open University. The data of the study were gathered through narrative research/inquiry, a form of qualitative research, in particular, through the personal narratives of students. They were analyzed through the thematic analysis method, according to which they were coded and segmented into themes or categories to help researchers make sense out of the text data. According to the findings of the study, it was revealed that almost all participants regarded academic writing as a complex, challenging and difficult skill that can be improved through practice and guidance. According to the students of the specific research, the major problems they faced were: in-text citations and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of their tutors or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. Concurrently, students referred to specific practices which would help them improve their academic writing, such as the tutor assignment feedback and explanation, a guide or even a training course in academic writing skills, extensive practice in assignment writing, personal involvement in research on academic writing.

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Σκοπός της παρούσας μελέτης ήταν η διερεύνηση των απόψεων και των προκλήσεων των Ελλήνων φοιτητών, οι οποίοι διεκπεραιώνουν μεταπτυχιακό δίπλωμα στη διδασκαλία της Αγγλικής γλώσσας σε ομιλητές άλλων γλωσσών (TESOL) μέσω προγράμματος εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο. Τα δεδομένα της μελέτης συγκεντρώθηκαν μέσω της αφηγηματικής έρευνας, μιας μορφής ποιοτικής έρευνας, και συγκεκριμένα μέσω του τύπου προσωπικών αφηγήσεων των φοιτητών. Αναλύθηκαν μέσω της μεθόδου της θεματικής ανάλυσης, κωδικοποιήθηκαν και ταξινομήθηκαν σε θεματικές ή

κατηγορίες για να βοηθήσουν τους ερευνητές να κατανοήσουν τα δεδομένα των κειμένων. Σύμφωνα με τα ευρήματα της μελέτης, αποκαλύφθηκε ότι σχεδόν όλοι οι συμμετέχοντες θεωρούσαν την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή ως μια περίπλοκη και δύσκολη δεξιότητα που μπορεί να βελτιωθεί με εξάσκηση και καθοδήγηση. Επιπλέον, με βάση τα λόγια των φοιτητών, οι παραπομπές στο κείμενο και οι βιβλιογραφικές αναφορές, η λογοκλοπή, τα γλωσσικά προβλήματα, η έλλειψη σαφών κατευθυντήριων γραμμών εκ μέρους των διδασκόντων ή η αντικρουόμενη ανατροφοδότηση από διαφορετικούς διδάσκοντες ανήκαν στις μεγάλες δυσκολίες που αντιμετωπίζαν. Παράλληλα, οι φοιτητές αναφέρθηκαν σε ορισμένες πρακτικές, όπως είναι η ανατροφοδότηση και η επεξήγηση από τον διδάσκοντα, ένας οδηγός ή ακόμη και ένα εκπαιδευτικό μάθημα σε ακαδημαϊκές δεξιότητες γραφής, η εκτεταμένη εξάσκηση στις εργασίες, αλλά και η προσωπική συμμετοχή στην έρευνα για την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή, οι οποίες θα μπορούσαν να τους βοηθήσουν να βελτιώσουν την ακαδημαϊκή γραφή.

Keywords: academic writing, distance learning, TESOL

1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for many young scholars today is fine-honing their academic writing skills during the course of their studies in higher education institutions. These challenges, however, are further compounded when the individuals, assuming the role of the learner, are adults, with a complex lifestyle and a set of pre-determined learning experiences who have embarked on a distance learning graduate program. While there is a plethora of research on academic literacy in brick and mortar institutional settings, very little work has been carried out to date in distance education learning environments, especially in Greece. This study seeks to fill that void in this area of inquiry by probing into the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a postgraduate degree through a distance learning program in TESOL.

2. Academic literacy in (distance) education

Most of the research in *academic literacy* is grounded in the work of the *New Literacy Studies* movement (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994) which not only did it not construe the term *literacy* as a “unitary concept” but it further challenged the assumption that the mastery of a particular set of cognitive skills could be applied to any given context and discipline indiscriminately. Their theoretical assumption is that literacies are “[...] cultural and social practices [...]” which “[...] vary depending upon the particular context in which they occur [...]” (Lea 2004, p. 740). Working within this theoretical framework, the emerging *Academic Literacy* movement (Jones *et al.*, 1999; Lea & Stierer, 2000) probed into more specific contexts of higher education and particularly investigated the gap between instructors’ and students’ understanding of writing for assessment within a higher education setting. Further research on academic literacies branched out from this point on and had been carried out in a multitude of other settings as well: in brick and mortar institutions (Lea & Street, 1998), in distance learning environments (Stierer, 1997; Lea, 1998), and with “non-traditional” students (Lea, 1994; Lillis, 1997; Ivanić, 1998). The methodology adopted by most of these researchers subscribes to the interpretivist/constructivist (qualitative) research paradigm, mostly due to the nature of the work inherent in these studies.

However, a relatively recent study (Lear & Prentice, 2016) which is directly related to this paper was carried out in distance learning programs in Australia and centered on self-regulating learning among first year international students and specifically on the manner with which students to whom English is a foreign language grapple with the complex demands of academic writing as they pursue undergraduate work in online programs. Throughout this research the authors probed into ways this student population maximizes the use of distance learning/online programs as independent learners in order to develop the requisite academic literacy and mastery of the English language which will in return help them throughout their undergraduate studies. By understanding how these students learn in such environments, the researchers believe that they will be able to make wiser choices about the use of technology to support this student population with respect to academic literacy also affecting curriculum planning and design.

Putting academic writing into practice, however, is anything but a smooth sailing. From a plethora of studies in the greater vicinity of academic literacy (Stierer 1997; Lea & Street, 1998; Lea, 2004; Dysthe, 2007; Panourgia & Zafiri, 2009; Zorbas 2014; Zafiri & Panourgia, 2011; Zorbas 2014), one can delineate the major problems many students face in their effort to weave together the strands of their research projects into coherent texts which subscribe to the conventions of academic writing:

- a. *Educational experiences and prior beliefs about teaching and learning.* Some scholars (Kember et al. 2003, Laing et al. 2005) argue that our former educational experiences as well as our pre-conceived notions on teaching and learning impact the manner with which we grapple with the multifaceted demands of academic writing. For instance, students who have been immersed in a highly teacher-centered and exam-oriented learning environment would give prominence to the final written exam as a more efficient and valid assessment tool and “downplay” the value of academic assignment writing all together.
- a. *Minimum training in the conventions of academic writing.* Plodding through one’s course requirements in higher education institutions and completing all required assignments does not lead to the mastery of academic literacy. According to Lea (2004), academic literacy involves high-level argumentation as well the mastery of the appropriate language in order to convincingly bring forward one’s arguments -a skill which requires rigorous training and is by no means developed automatically. Part of the learning experience as well as the socialization process for students in higher education is developing the required academic discourse and fine-honing the necessary academic writing skills in order to survive and succeed in their studies. Regardless of the one’s subject area, academic writing remains one of the greatest hurdles and, thus, as Mullen (2001) states, students need to undergo a productive, systematic and well-designed rigorous training in academic writing that will help them change their perceptions as non-writers and immerse them into its complexities.

This is an area that severely plagues higher education in Greece and has handicapped many of our students, regardless of whether they attend brick and mortar institutions or pursue academic work through online programs. The focus of this paper is on the views and challenges of Greek adult learners pursuing a graduate degree in TEFL through a distance learning graduate program at the Hellenic Open University.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

Allowing for the purpose of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do Greek students perceive academic writing in distance learning within the TESOL context?
2. What challenges/difficulties do students face when they are engaged in academic writing?
3. What good practices do students report?
4. What still needs to be done to help students improve academic writing?

3.2. Research design

The data of the study, as aforementioned, were gathered through the narrative research/inquiry, a form of qualitative research, which “[...] provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories [...]” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 3). It is regarded variously as a “story,” a “mode of knowing” and a “method of inquiry” that contributes to knowledge communication and meaning construction (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 7). In particular, it has spread to educational research focusing on collecting individual stories and reporting teachers’ and students’ experiences/views in actual educational settings offering practical and specific insights (Creswell, 2011). More often than not, narrative researchers probe into the experiences of one or more individuals in actual educational settings asking them to present orally or in writing their individual stories on their learning experiences and retell the story that may include the characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution. These stories, also called field texts, constitute the raw data, which researchers analyze identifying themes or categories to retell/narrate the story that emerges by organizing the key elements into a sequence (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2000; Creswell, 2011). In this way, this information brings researchers closer to the actual practice of education.

More specifically, the data of this study were collected through the type of personal narratives of students (Casey, 1995/1996; Creswell, 2011). The researchers, allowing for the aim of the present study, asked students to voluntarily present, in writing, their learning experiences and views on academic writing, as it was experienced in a Distance Learning program in the TESOL context.

3.3. Setting/Participants

The participants of the study were postgraduate students of the MA program ‘The Teaching of English as a Foreign/International Language’ at the Hellenic Open University. The aim of the program is to boost English Language, Literature and Philology graduates’ professional development as teachers of English as a foreign and as an international lingua franca by involving them in theoretical and practical studies in the domain of language teaching methodology, according to the demands of the current local and international labor market (<https://www.eap.gr/en/courses/417-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language/5053-the-teaching-of-english-as-a-foreign-international-language-starting-from-the-academic-year-2017-2018>). The studies last for three years approximately, while the program ECTS credits are 120. Eight second-year and third-year students attending module 67 ‘Teaching English to Young Learners’ participated in the study. Participants were all female, aged between 25 to 50, who came from various regions of Northern Greece and

belonged to different socio-economic status.

3.4. Data analysis

The data of the study, the field texts, were analyzed through the thematic analysis method (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). As with all qualitative research, the data can be coded and segmented into themes or categories to help researchers make sense out of the text data (Creswell, 2011). Namely, the researchers studied the data several times until they reached a coding of the most salient information according to the aims of the study; they focused on specific data and disregarded other data that did not provide evidence for the pertinent themes following an inductive process of narrowing data into a few themes (Creswell, 2011). The results of the study are presented in the next section, where excerpts from students' texts also appear to provide rich data and an objective interpretation of students' experiences and views on academic writing in Distance Learning within the TESOL context.

4. Results

4.1. Students' perception of academic writing

According to the findings of the study, it was revealed that almost all participants regarded academic writing as a complex, challenging and difficult skill that they need to master, as they admitted that they had not been engaged in academic writing during their undergraduate studies, acknowledging, though, that it is a skill that can be improved through practice and guidance. In particular, one student stated: "[w]hen I entered this program I realized how different and difficult it is to write in an academic style. I found it quite difficult since I have never dealt with such a thing during my studies in university". Another student mentioned: "[a]cademic writing cannot be seen as a simple process of placing one's thoughts in writing, as with other narrative discourse types. Academic writing is a constant struggle of striking a balance between what has been already voiced by renowned researchers and adding something novel to the field. Undeniably, of course, this is an art to be mastered". Similarly, "[a]cademic writing does not constitute a reproduction of other writers' ideas and suggestions, but it should be a critical evaluation of the topic based on the resources studied". According to another student's words: "[a]cademic writing is a process that all students are able to improve when their weak points are identified and properly addressed".

4.2. Aspects of academic writing according to students' views

Regarding the aspects of academic writing, it was shown that almost all students considered language to be highly important for academic writing. Namely, most of them viewed the appropriate use of language and vocabulary as a critical parameter of academic writing pointing mainly to formal language and writing (e.g., use of third person, passive voice, gerunds, subjunctive). A student wrote: "[a]n important aspect of academic writing is language. This is the most important asset of the assignment, as it allows the reader to understand the central idea of the assignment with the minimum amount of cognitive effort". Another one mentioned: "[a]cademic writing has to do with formal language and (formal) writing (e.g., the use of the passive voice and the avoidance of the first personal pronoun)". Allowing for another student's words, "[t]he language used in an academic writing should be carefully chosen in order to promote explicitness and coherence. Formal language should be used in academic writing by avoiding colloquial language or

abbreviations". At the same time, it was found that half of the students considered reference use and citation to be a significant part of academic writing. A student stated: "[d]ocumenting views through in-text citations is an important convention of academic writing". Another student highlighted: "[a]cademic writing includes a set of rules in terms of appropriate organization of references (such as, direct quotation and paraphrasing)[...] the provision of evidence to support their views appears to be essential. Students should integrate their resources into the written text in a way that they acknowledge another writer's contribution expressing at the same time their own viewpoint". In a similar manner, another student mentioned: "[a]part from the text itself, attention should be paid to paraphrasing and citing the references used". Moreover, a couple of students referred to the proper structure that their assignments should follow. For example, "[...]the text should have a clear structure and be divided in meaningful paragraphs. It should also be coherent and reader- friendly". According to another student's words, "[...]the term does not only apply to the proper language use but also to the proper structure of the written text'.

4.3. Student challenges in academic writing

According to students' words, they faced many difficulties when they were involved in academic writing having mainly to do with in-text citation and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of tutors or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. More specifically, most students reported that reference use and citation were the greatest challenges in academic writing. One student stated that: "[b]ibliographic referencing and in-text citations have been difficult to handle; it took me the whole first module to fully understand the importance of supporting my arguments through references that were rather recent". Similarly, "[f]inding evidence to support all my claims was hard and reading all these articles to find the ones I could use as references was even more tiring". Another student wrote: "[c]orrectly citing sources, writing a thesis statement and elaborating on ideas were common problems faced in almost every assignment". Allowing for another student's words, "[a]nother thing that was demanding and time-consuming was to learn how to cite the list of sources I have used". Simultaneously, the specific difficulty was inextricably linked to the issue of plagiarism by some students. Namely, one student mentioned that: "[t]he writing process is often a long road of false starts, hesitations, endless corrections, whereas the danger of plagiarism is always there [...] confusion about how to cite correctly can result in plagiarism". According to a student's words, "[a]nother thing that I should have had in mind was the matter of plagiarism. Any claim should have been based on appropriate justification, which came from studying the relevant literature and the work of experts in the field". Furthermore, a couple of students referred to language problems, as they were asked to be engaged in academic writing in a foreign language, which poses extra difficulties. For instance, "[...] it is not easy to be asked to use academic writing in a language that is not your mother tongue". Another one explained: "[w]hen I have to write an assignment I want to have a wide variety of vocabulary, which sometimes results in the wrong choice of words after using a dictionary. Also in an effort to paraphrase different theories, I choose more informal words that usually come in my mind". Moreover, another difficulty mentioned by half of the students had to do with the lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of the tutors or the conflicting feedback coming from different faculty members. For instance, one student stated: "[a]fter all, nobody explained it to me. Most of the tutors expect that we already know how to use such a writing style. But nobody taught us how to write an academic assignment not even at university". Another one pointed out: "[t]here was conflicting feedback from different faculty members. There was lack of a particular guide followed strictly by the consultant of each module. More specifically, in many instances different consultants had different

opinions about specific matters concerning the writing of the assignments, which quite often caused confusion'. According to another student's words, "[m]y tutors' guidelines regarding the way my assignments had to be written seemed unjustifiably contradictory, as each tutor seemed to explain academic writing from their own point of view".

4.4. Good practices according to students' views

Concurrently, students referred to some practices, such as the assignment feedback, tutor explanation, practice in assignment writing, personal involvement in research on academic writing, which helped them improve academic writing. In particular, some students considered that the assignment feedback and tutor explanation during the sessions played an important role in their improvement in academic writing. For example, it was mentioned: "[t]he assignment feedback throughout the years has been an immense help and a point of reference". One student replied: "[e]xamples and explanations during the sessions helped a lot". Another student stated: "[t]he input and guidance received from tutors regarding academic writing and its complexities and conventions are deemed to be an invaluable source of information". Some students also referred to their personal involvement in research on academic writing and practice in assignment writing that helped them improve. For instance: "[m]y personal research on academic writing throughout the web helped me understand and improve it. The assignment writing also served as a base to evolve and adapt my own writing by using proper sentencings, adopting the type of syntax that facilitates the message conveyance and the proper outline of the assignment that improves cohesion". Another one reported that: "[t]his year I suppose I have become more mature and so has my writing. I have overcome all the difficulties concerning formatting and my only challenge now is to write something worth writing. I got the hang of it and writing in the APA style comes naturally". Similarly, "[w]hat I found really helpful in order to improve my skills in academic writing was to read a lot of relevant to the topic sources and always keep notes of the most important parts that would fit into my assignment. I have used dictionaries and Thesaurus in order to find synonyms so as not to repeat the same words all the time". According to another student's words, "I believe that laborious, extensive reading of articles or books, continuous study of APA style formatting and working on structural elements, such as building one's arguments through daily exercise, are practices that are bound to improve one's academic style of writing, certainly not overnight but steadily enough".

4.5. What needs to be done to help students improve their academic writing skills

In addition, the results of the study demonstrated that most of the students highlighted that explicit and appropriate guidelines were necessary to help them ameliorate academic writing. One student mentioned: "If we were provided with the right guidelines, I am sure our writing skills would improve". Another student suggested the creation of a writing guide on behalf of the tutors/affiliation to be used as a reference point throughout their studies when need be. For instance: "I strongly think that HOU should create an organized writing guide in which all the details referring to how written assignments should be structured could be included. Moreover, it should be strictly followed by all the consultants as well as the students and it should be the first thing distributed to the students when they first enter the program". Simultaneously, a couple of students proposed that special seminars/training courses should be organized by the HOU to assist students in coping with academic writing. "I strongly recommend that HOU provide a training course in academic writing skills for all postgraduate students at the beginning of the program so that we are better prepared for our assignments".

5. Discussion

This research probed into the views and challenges of Greek adult learners who were pursuing a postgraduate degree in TESOL through a distance learning program at the Hellenic Open University.

Allowing for the first research question, the results of the study revealed that most of the students regarded academic writing, in a foreign language, as something which does not come naturally but as a process which needs hard and meticulous work. It isn't enough to merely 'know' the foreign language 'well' to be able to write academically, it is "[...] an art to be mastered [...]", as one student, in this study, put it. Students with a sound grasp of English as a foreign language realize that academic writing entails devotion, very much like a long winding and tedious path, which they need to follow to become successful writers. It is, as Lear and Prentice (2016) put it, a form of self-regulating learning. They realize that academic writing is not a simple amalgamation of their work with the work of other authors. This realization becomes even more challenging for HOU students, who are the so-called non-traditional students (Ivanić, 1998). In other words, they are students who are not studying in a 'conventional' Greek University. They must strive hard and 'dig' into information and knowledge on their own, a process which is both lonely and difficult and needs self-discipline to achieve.

The second research question, which probed into the difficulties and /or challenges students faced when they were engaged in academic writing, raises the issue of what academic writing is or should be for both students and university lecturers. It seems that the students who participated in this study are confused with the concept of academic writing, in the sense that they feel their tutors/ lecturers all seem to have a different definition of academic writing. The aforementioned is in line with similar research conducted by Jones et al., 1999 and Stierer 2000, who found that there is a clear-cut gap between instructors' and students' understanding of what writing for assessment is in higher education. Students link academic writing, which is partly correct, only to in-text citations and bibliographic referencing, plagiarism, language problems, lack of explicit guidelines on behalf of their tutors (see also Wagenmakers 2009), or conflicting feedback from different faculty members. The students who took part in this research seem to fear a blank piece of paper which hasn't, yet, been filled in with 'words of wisdom' (see also a similar research conducted by Maharshi, 2008), which will show the depth of their knowledge upon the subject which they are studying. They fear making mistakes, weaving the new knowledge into the old (see also Dysthe 2007), or producing errors which will 'cost marks/grades', even though it is well known that we learn from our errors and mistakes (see Corder 1967; Ferris 1999; James 2013). They also fear plagiarizing unintentionally. As one student, very successfully, put it "[t]he writing process is often a long road of false starts, hesitations, endless corrections, whereas the danger of plagiarism is always there [...] confusion about how to cite correctly can result in plagiarism". But even plagiarism is something they need to be taught. Students should train themselves to avoid plagiarizing the work of others, in other words they should be able to know when and how they appropriate "[...] authorship and ownership of [a] text" (Pennycook, 1996:201), or even when they are self-plagiarizing (Adreescu 2013). In other words, they need to be taught the concept of plagiarism and self-plagiarism (Bretag & Mahmud 2009; Panourgia & Zafiri 2009; Andreeescu 2013; Bruton 2014), as this is an integral part of academic writing, which some students, in this research, seem to be familiar with. As one student wrote, "[d]ocumenting views through in-text citations is an important convention of academic writing", it is the ability or the disability of the student(s) to weave

in the newly acquired knowledge or the high knowledge argumentation and academic register needed to convince a reader (see Lea 2004). Based on the students' answers, we conclude that students should not only be taught the concept, principles and conventions of academic writing (see Lea 2004), but should also be encouraged and trained to write academically (see Wischgoll 2017). Tutors/lecturers of the Hellenic Open University should not merely assume that MA students write or can write academically, they need to incorporate the teaching of academic writing (see Mullen 2001) in their teaching practices if they want their students to be able to write using a more academic style of writing.

Concerning the third research question, it seems that students were able to 'find their way' or at least 'find a way' to write using a more academic style of writing (see also Zorbas 2014). Constant practice, a "[...]metalinguistic awareness in L2 writing [...]", as Ofte (2014: 3) puts it, a better understanding of what academic writing entails (see also Lear and Prentice 2016) striving for perfection (which is much harder to achieve, Fox in Rao 2015) or excellence as Rao (2015) puts it, reading extensively on the subject as well as their tutors'/lecturers' guidance and feedback (see also Coffin et al., 2003) all seem to aid students towards improving their academic writing skills.

The last research question raises the issue of what still needs to be done to improve students' academic writing. According to the results of the study, most of the students proposed that a special training course should be offered to all students, on entering the HOU at an MA level, this stance is in line with Mullen (2001) who supports that students should undergo rigorous training in academic writing to become productive and successful writers (see also Egege & Kutieleh 2004). The students of this research also suggested that a booklet on academic writing should be distributed to all students, which is not hyperbolic if I may add, so that they can "[...] put ideas into [their] own words and paragraphs [...]" thus achieving "[...] clear communication [...]" in their text (Horkoff 2011,) from as early as the first semester, and that both students and tutors/lecturers should abide to it.

6. Conclusion

To round off, we, as tutors/lecturers, should not assume that our MA students know what academic writing is or that they can write using a more academic style of writing. Academic writing needs work and guidance by the tutor/lecturer, and most of all it needs meticulous and diligent work on behalf of the students themselves. Sometimes we, as tutors/lecturers, need to 'to open doors' and 'take our students by the hand' and lead them to the 'wonderful world of academic writing'.

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