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Relationship between Writing Skills of Native and Foreign Languages in Military Students

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Abstract:

The article deals with research conducted on the students of Military Technology at the University of Defence and it highlights some aspects of their writing skills both in their native language (Czech) and English. English language skills are considered to be an integrated part of the profile of the graduates of Military Technology. The authors believe that writing skills in both languages are indispensable for a good scientist in all branches, including military technology. Thus the article presents one of the ways how to identify some pitfalls in learning English in students of Military Technology, and how to address them.

Keywords:

Error analysis, language learning, language skills, grammar, vocabulary, military university, military students

1. Introduction

Although professional knowledge and academic skills are undoubtedly essential precondition of becoming a successful researcher, communication abilities in English play in this process also a significant role. Every internationally recognized expert has to understand and be understood in English. Otherwise his/her genius could stay unnoticed by expert community. Considering the number of English lessons taught to the students of the Faculty of Military Technology, it seems that the Faculty management fully realizes the importance of English for future military professionals and/ or academics (300 lessons of English in Bachelors' Programme, 120 lessons of English in Masters' Programme and 120 lessons in Ph.D. Programme).

On the other hand, we must admit that generally speaking, technically gifted students are not always equally talented in languages. Therefore language teachers often have to face lots of challenges in teaching English; nevertheless they are well

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prepared for teaching this sort of students. Moreover, they continuously try to find better and more effective ways for teaching. They closely scrutinize the problems occurring in the lessons. In such a way, the problem of this paper has been revealed. In lessons, or rather when assessing written homework, we have noticed that writing skills seem to be the least developed ones in students of our faculty. However, this was just our subjective impression based on observation and we wanted to find some facts which would support our opinion.

So we have gathered and surveyed the data related to the faculty students' results in standardized military language exam NATO STANAG 6001. We considered this data highly valuable since based on the language profile, we were able to identify which skill the students are best at and which of the skills is the most problematic one for them. We have analysed the results achieved in English by 31 March 2012 in SLP (Standardized Language Profile) 2 and 3 of NATO STANAG 6001 exams.

In the data file containing the results in SLP 2 examinations, there were 128 students. The highest failure rate was in two productive skills - in speaking 21 % and in writing – 20 %. In listening, only 4 % of students failed; in reading it was almost the same – just 5 %. The results of SLP 3 have shown writing as clearly the most difficult skill to acquire. The failure rate of receptive skills was, as in SLP 2, rather low – 11 % for reading and only 7 % for listening. Nonetheless, in productive skills, the failure rate was much higher – for speaking it was 42 %. In writing part of the exam, even more students failed than succeeded – the failure rate was 60 %.

2. Theoretical Background

Following years of practice in teaching English, we have come to the conclusion that Academic Writing needs a lot of practice in creating, building and analysing ideas (Myles, 2002, p. 1). Generally, writing skills in native language are very complex and difficult to acquire. Needless to say, writing in a foreign language is even more demanding because "students writing in a second language are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition" (Myles, 2002, p. 1).

Although Jelinek stresses the interconnection of all language skills, he particularly appreciates the fact that writing frequently brings the stronger and more permanent recollection of language phenomena than oral activities. Undoubtedly, writing skills needs "to be practiced and learned through the experience" (Jelinek, 1993, p. 246). Moreover, writing in a foreign language requires not only the ability to properly use grammar and vocabulary, but also mastering writing techniques and strategies.

Realizing all this, we have decided to approach the problem of writing by error analysis hoping that this may help us to firstly detect the problems in writing and subsequently to properly adapt teaching content and method. We believe that reducing mistakes in writing will result in improving the quality of writing products of the Faculty of Military Technology students.

Basically, there are two types of errors – intralingual and developmental. Intralingual errors "reflect the general characteristics of rule learning" (Richards, 1970, p. 6), while developmental errors "illustrate the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language their limited experiences" (Richards, 1970, p. 6). Apart from its advantages, this approach has also some drawbacks, since the error analysis is built on heterogeneous data, the error categories in it are unclear; in addition to this, the analysis cannot deal with e.g. avoidance and it provides only a

static picture of foreign language learning (Dagneaux, Denness, Granger, 1998, p. 164).

3. Research Question and Conditions

When we compared the level of individual language skills in our students (as mentioned above), we realized that writing was the weakest one. When we discussed the possible reasons of this fact, we came to the initial hypothesis we based our research on that students who have problems with writing in Czech will probably also have problems in writing in English, as well as those who are good at writing in Czech will probably succeed in this skill in English, too. Thus, we expected a strong relationship between some language categories in Czech and in English.

To prove or to disprove this premise, we have designed the following research phases. Firstly, we chose the sample students (cca 20 students of the 1st year and 11 students of 2nd year of the Bachelors' Study Programme). The level of all students was approximately lower intermediate. Next, we have formulated three different writing tasks in both Czech and English (complaint, cover letter, and composition). Each task was given the recommended length; for the first two tasks we set the points to cover while for the last one, only the title was formulated.

The complaint in Czech concerned the stay in a summer holiday resort; in English the complaint was about hotel service. The cover letter in Czech was focused on a students' part-time job for a company which required it; in English it was a cover letter to a university abroad. The topic of the composition was identical for both Czech and English: The Internet - a good servant but bad master. For the first two tasks the students were given instructions, as well as sample writings. However, for the composition there were neither instructions nor sample writings since they have already written this kind of writing in both languages.

To be able to process the collected data, we have designed assessment criteria for both complaint and cover letter, while for the composition we have adopted the assessment criteria of ESL Composition Profile by Jacobs et al. (1981, p. 30). The criteria for complaint in both languages were as follows: communication task (max. 15 points), required information (max. 5 points), layout (max. 10 points), grammar and syntax (max. 25 points), vocabulary (max. 25 points) and style (max. 20 points). For cover letter, the same criteria were used plus one more category: appropriateness of the content (max. 5 points). ESL Composition Profile assesses the following areas: content (max. 30 points), organization (max. 20 points), vocabulary (max. 20 points), language use (max. 25 points) and mechanics (max. 5 points).

4. Results and Discussion

All writings were administered and processed in LMS Moodle within one academic year. All completed writing tasks were further assessed by the authors analytically using the above described criteria. Afterwards, the correlations were calculated for each kind of writing between different categories separately in Czech and in English and then in the same categories between both languages. Finally, main categories in both languages were correlated.

4.1. Correlations

As we have previously stated, our primary goal was to find out if there is a strong relationship between general students' abilities to write in their native language and in English. However, the research which we have conducted has revealed some surprising outcomes.

The strongest correlations have been identified between grammar and vocabulary in Czech in writing a complaint (0.92), cover letter (0.96), composition (0.81), as well as in all Czech writings together (0.85). Similarly, the relationship between English grammar and vocabulary was also strong, though slightly lower – writing a complaint (0.69), cover letter (0.96), composition (0.72); all English writings altogether 0.76.

The assumption that the relationship between using grammar in Czech and English, as well as using vocabulary in Czech and English, will be rather strong has not been proven; thus, the correlations here were quite weak – the correlation between Czech grammar and English grammar reached the value of 0.40 in writing a complaint, only 0.19 in cover letter, 0.06 in composition; in all writings altogether 0.28. Further on, the relationship between Czech and English vocabulary has shown comparable results: 0.43 in complaint, 0.26 in cover letter, 0.21 in composition and 0.50 in all writings altogether.

The weakest correlations were detected in the relationship between writing style in Czech and English: 0.38 in complaint, 0.36 in cover letter, - 0.03 in composition, and 0.36 altogether in all writings.

Tab. 1 Correlation Table for Writing Tasks

	complaint	cover letter	composition	all writings
GrCz – VocCz	0.92	0.95	0.81	0.85
GrEn – VocEn	0.69	0.96	0.72	0.75
GrCz – GrEn	0.40	0.19	0.06	0.28
VocCz – VocEn	0.43	0.26	0.22	0.50
WrStCz – WrStEn	0.38	0.36	–0.03	0.36

where:
GrEn – VocEn: Grammar in English – Vocabulary in English,
GrCz – GrEn: Grammar in Czech – Grammar in English,
VocCz – VocEn: Vocabulary in Czech – Vocabulary in English,
WrStCz – WrStEn: Writing style in Czech – Writing style in English.

4.2. Frequent Negative Phenomena in Writings

Apart from quantitative data previously interpreted, the authors have also recorded certain imperfections repeatedly identified in the students' writings.

One of the most frequent problems was repeated usage of cliché phrase in Czech *z pohodlí / tepla domova* (used by seven students). It can be assumed that the students have picked them up from TV commercials. The authors do not consider commercials to be an appropriate source from which the students should obtain their vocabulary input.

Another negative phenomenon detected in writings was using the texts from the Internet which were copied and pasted in the text (four times). Suspected using online

translators, as well as inappropriate use of dictionaries (literal translations), was identified in seven writings.

Generally spoken, the most frequent phenomenon observed by authors in most of the writings in both languages was the use of spoken instead of written style in terms of register and style as a whole. Possible explanations of this could lie in the fact that students rarely need to write in their real lives, apart from writing short messages and/ or tweets. Another possible reason behind that could be seen in current national educational approaches in primary and secondary schooling.

5. Conclusion

We are fully aware of some limitations of the method used in the study – error analysis in its nature is somewhat limited, since it does not "provide a complete picture of learner language", as well as it gives "only a very static view of L2 acquisition" (Elis, 2012, p. 61).

On the other hand, error analysis "is more likely to serve as a means for investigating a specific research question rather than for providing a comprehensive account of learners' idiosyncratic forms" and this was our primary goal (Elis, 2012, p. 63).

The original authors' assumption concerning the strong correlations between the level of writing in Czech and English has not been proven by the presented research. Nevertheless, the study has produced interesting results, mainly in proving high correlations between the level of grammar and vocabulary in both Czech and English, although not across the languages.

Since the study was conducted on rather limited number of students, it could be recommended to repeat it on a larger sample of respondents. Another possibility of elaborating on error analysis is to compare the level of writing of two groups while one of them will be a control group and the other one, the experimental one, will be given additional reading materials assuming that developing receptive reading skill will result in improving productive writing skill.

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