

Testing Literacy at Tertiary Level: A Case Study

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Abstract

This article examines students' literacy at a tertiary level. The study involved 40 post-graduate students enrolled in the English for Specific Purposes Course at the Law University of Lithuania. At the end of the course, learners' literacy skills were tested by administering reading and writing assignments as well as vocabulary and grammar tests. The main findings that have emerged as a result of this case study are typology of errors in writing, reading, vocabulary and grammar. Common writing mistakes include poor organization of a text, lengthy sentences, inconsistent usage of vocabulary, plagiarism, lack of structure, and various grammatical mistakes, like sentences without verbs, flaws in subject-verb agreement, misuse of tenses, spelling errors. Learners' linguistic deficit includes shortage of both professional and general vocabulary. Learners' factual performance in tests has been compared with their anticipated performance. The data on students' anticipated performance were obtained through self-assessment questionnaires administered a fortnight before the actual testing. The analysis of students' literacy allows to draw conclusions about efficiency in learnability. The key issue is students' lack of learning strategies, i.e. knowledge how to learn.

'The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read.
It will be the person who does not know how to learn.'
Alvin Toffler.

Introduction

There is a comprehensive diversity of definitions of literacy available in today's dictionaries and thesauruses. Traditionally, literacy refers to the ability to read and write. In a contemporary world, literacy implies reading and writing in any language at a level that is adequate for communication and enables individuals to function successfully in a society.

In the context of a language, literacy is the ability to read, write and use information appropriately in a range of applications. It involves the integration of productive and receptive skills and includes the cultural knowledge necessary in various social and cultural settings. An important part of literacy is adequate reading and writing skills: the competent use of reading strategies and the art of writing clearly, concisely and accurately.

This paper examines some aspects of learners' literacy in English for Specific Purposes. The case study focuses on testing reading and writing skills, use of professional vocabulary and grammar. The data are analyzed and discussed in the context of life-long learning.

Literature Review

Issues related to the teaching of reading and writing skills and to the research findings on these skills by non-native speakers are of a particular interest to linguists and teachers, who claim that the ability to write accurately, briefly and clearly is one of the most valuable and essential skills, and is closely intertwined with reading skills.

It is thought that 'knowledge of genre is a key element in all communication and especially significant in writing academic or professional texts' (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998:115). 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. In order for communication to be successful, there are a number of language production processes which should be followed. '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, 2001:246). There are certain conventions that have to be followed in writing and speaking. 'Such rules and conventions are not written down anywhere, nor are they easy to define. There are three areas of rules to follow: socio-cultural rules or shared cultural habits and turn-taking in speaking. Rules for writing range from the 'netiquette' of computer users to the accepted patterns or conventions in different genres'. It means that a different level of formality is used, which is sometimes described as 'distance' or 'closeness'. Language production can be either more formal or more informal.

There are a number of reasons why students find language production difficult (Harmer, 2001:251): 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.

An important part of writing is the ability to summarize. Generally speaking, in education, summarizing is invaluable: learners have to sum up various 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 key features of a summary are: first, a summary is shorter than the original text, second, a summary describes the same ideas in different phrases and sentences. The process of summarizing consists of reading and writing stages.

A good summary presents in a condensed form the gist of an original source by reducing minor details and presenting an overall statement followed by the essential points of the text. The goal of summarizing is an accurate and concise presentation of the original's key points.

There are some important criteria for writing an effective summary that we used to instruct and train our students in writing (Kavaliauskienė and Janulevičienė, 2001:26). The key guidelines on composing a summary are: 1) appropriate layout comprising three parts – an introduction, main information, and conclusions, 2) a scope of 20% to 25% of a text, 3) no verbatim copying, 4) application of ABC rule (Accurate, Brief, Clear), 5) avoiding grammar or spelling errors, 6) effective analysis and generalization, not narration of a text.

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 research on reading-writing relationships in ESP, three important facts emerged: learners' reading rates are low, writing (or reading) involves translating ideas from mother tongue into the second language, or from the second language into their mother tongue (Kavaliauskienė, 2004).

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 requires students to select information, which involves decision taking on how important or unimportant the facts are, and generalize and reorganize information

(<http://www.sinc.sunysb.edu/Class/sourcebk/frost1sumframe2.html>).

Common writing mistakes include: poor text organization, lengthy sentences and words, inadequate content, inconsistent usage, poor page layout, repetition, plagiarism, lack of structure and various grammatical mistakes, e.g. missing verbs, no subject-verb agreement, wrong spelling and punctuation, misuse of tenses (<http://www.bookrags.com/articles/1.html>). Some sources claim that at least 90% of problems are errors of styles, e.g. the structure of a text (http://www.sfwa.org/writing/mistakes_allen.htm).

Testing written summaries presents two particular problems. The first is making decisions about the matter of control, objectivity of the evaluation, and naturalness of the writing test. The second major problem with testing writing is the necessity to develop a scale that allows it to be graded as objectively as possible (Kitao & Kitao, 1998).

Participants and testing procedure

In this study, there were 40 post-graduate students who have had ESP instruction for two academic years. At the beginning of the course, learners' proficiency was evaluated by administering an Oxford Placement Test which offers an extremely reliable basis for the initial assessment of students of English. Overall, 10 students out of 40 were placed as absolute beginners, minimal users, and the rest 30 students as elementary, limited users.

In the ESP course, learners were taught productive and receptive skills including the skills of writing summaries of professional texts, reading strategies, ESP vocabulary, relevant grammar. Students practised writing summaries of professional texts either in the classroom or as home assignments.

In literacy testing, students were requested to write summaries of professional texts in the classroom. The scope of ESP texts comprised about 2,500 characters, and the time allocated for summarizing amounted to 45 minutes. Students' summaries were graded in accordance with scoring standards for written work at a tertiary level.

The performance of students in another literacy skill – usage of ESP vocabulary - which is crucial for the development of mastery of writing, was tested. Tests consisted of gapped texts with a given vocabulary bank. The scope of the texts was about 2,500 characters; there were 20 gaps and 24 ESP vocabulary items. Students were allocated 30 minutes for completing a task.

Learners' performance in tenses was tested by administering a priori piloted tests consisting of 10 coherent sentences. Students were asked to choose an appropriate tense for each infinitive in brackets.

Results and discussion

Majority of students have shown their ability to lay out summaries in accordance with accepted standards of summarizing. 70% of students produced coherent summaries of appropriate scope (ranging between 20% and 25% of a text). The rest 30% either exceeded the appropriate size or contracted it.

The typology of the most common errors in writing summaries is as follows. Subject-verb agreement, language transfer, spelling and articles make the list of the prevailing mistakes, while prepositions, word order and punctuation cause difficulties to a fewer learners. Errors in usage of grammatical tenses are not so prominent in summaries. However, generally speaking, tenses are a key headache for a number of learners, particularly in the impromptu speech. In summarizing, students have some thinking time to reflect on the choice of tenses which obviously helps out to some extent. The misuse of adjectives and missing words were infrequent and are thought to be insignificant.

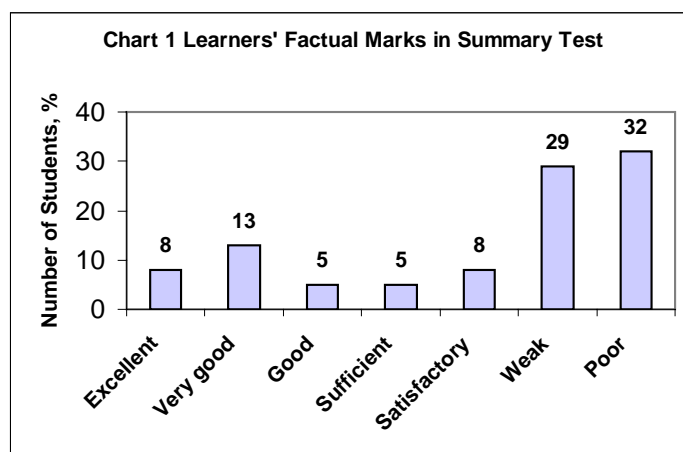
Language transfer is the second common mistake following subject-verb agreement errors. It is worth noting that generally speaking 'language transfer is not simply a consequence of

habit formation, or not simply interference, and not always native language influence' (Odin, 1996:36). However, it is often the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and native language. Classification of outcomes of language transfer includes positive and negative transfer, which, in turn, can lead to: 1) underproduction, i.e. avoiding structures that differ in mother tongue; 2) overproduction, i.e. writing simple sentences; 3) production errors, e.g. use of mother tongue structures, alterations of structures, and substitutions (Odin, 1996:37). However, key errors are usually caused by negative language transfer, i.e. when learners assume that there are no differences between two languages. That was the cause of major errors in our students' summaries.

A characteristic feature of writing that occurs in the students' summaries is very simple syntactic structures. One of possible explanations for such simplifications was suggested by Terence Odin. This phenomenon 'may be due primarily to inexperience in reading or writing in *any* language. In fact there is evidence that native-language literacy skills affect a number of aspects of second language performance, including writing' (Odin, 1996:68). In other words, if learners' writing skills in mother tongue are underdeveloped, it is quite likely that the mastery of writing in a second language resembles the writing in one's own language. Moreover, 'native language literacy seems to be a factor in success in learning to write in a second language. There is also reason to believe that individuals with more developed native-language literacy skills will perform better in second language writing' (Odin, 1996:135). In our opinion, our students' writing skills in mother tongue are much to be desired. This perception is justified by students' frequent complaints about inability to express ideas in their native language.

The grading system in Lithuania differs from systems in other countries. Overall, students' performance is graded by marks from 10 to 4: 10 is 'excellent', 9 is 'very good', 8 is 'good', 7 is 'sufficient', 6 is 'satisfactory', 5 is 'weak', and 4 is 'poor'.

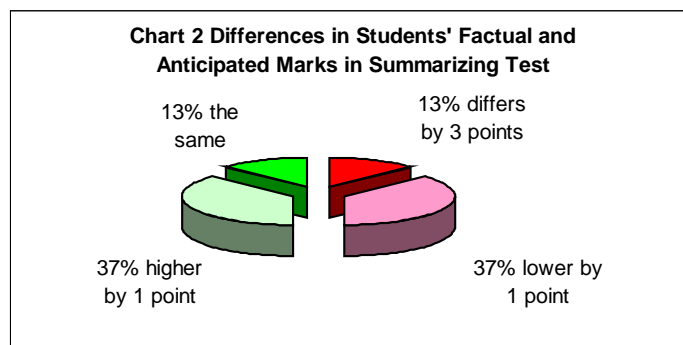
Distribution of students' marks in summaries is displayed in bar chart 1.



Scoring marks virtually demonstrate students' literacy in writing. Almost the third of students (32%) failed a test, and slightly fewer than the third (29%) demonstrated weak writing skills. Overall, only 26% of students revealed excellent (8%), very good (13%) or good (5%) summarizing skills. The rest performed either satisfactorily (8%) or sufficiently well (5%).

Marking and grading are considered to be inhibiting factors that tend to lower self-esteem of students. A strong emphasis on comparing students with each other demoralizes the less successful learners. That is why learners' self-assessment, which focuses on the quality rather than quantity of performance, has a positive influence on the motivation and self-esteem and promotes student learning. Learners' self-assessment of their achievements and feelings of accomplishment are important components of self-development. The major benefit of learner self-assessment is its impact on the learning, since the further progress in learning can be accelerated by the learners' awareness of what they know or do not know and how they can improve their knowledge.

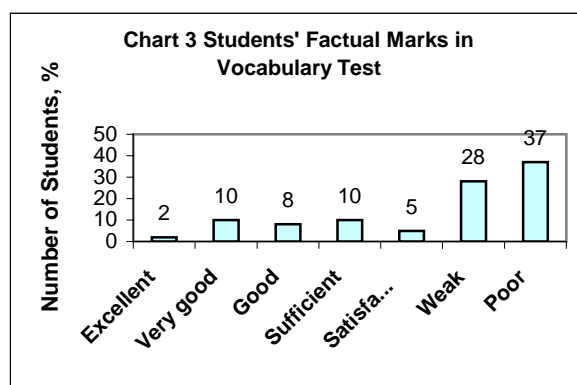
As part of self-assessment scheme, students were requested to predict their anticipated marks in all would-be-tested areas. It is interesting to compare students' factual marks with their anticipated ones. Surprisingly, high achievers tend to give themselves lower marks while low achievers aim at higher marks. These findings are demonstrated in pie chart 2.



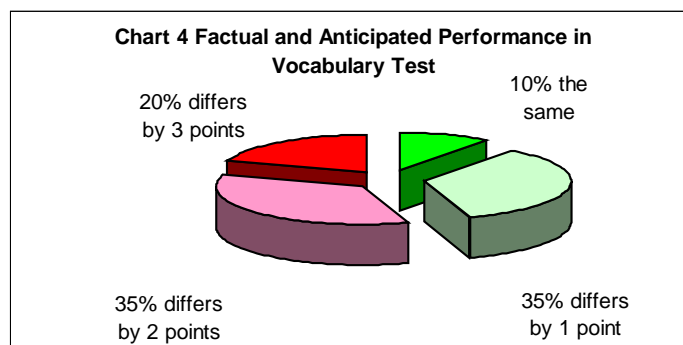
It can be seen that only minority of students (just 13%) are aware of their aptitudes: their factual and anticipated marks coincide. The same number of learners (37%) give themselves either higher or lower mark by one point. This difference in assessing one's performance is not significant. Therefore, on the whole 74% of students did not transgress much from assessing themselves correctly. The rest 13% of learners were taken unawares by getting by 3 points lower marks than expected. Disparity in placing anticipated position higher by 3 points shows that students do not perceive their factual level.

Knowledge of vocabulary is an important indication of literacy. Poor vocabulary signifies poor reading comprehension and inferior writing. Abundant vocabulary suggests better comprehension and adequate writing skills. Testing students' usage of ESP vocabulary gives insights into learner ability to use reading strategies and recognize word networks in professional materials.

Bar chart 3 depicts students' marks in tests of ESP vocabulary in use. Almost two thirds of learners (65%: weak - 28%, and poor - 37%) demonstrate inadequate use of vocabulary. Only 20% are proficient users: excellent - 2%, very good - 10%, and good - 8%. The rest 15% are in the middle of being sufficient and satisfactory users.

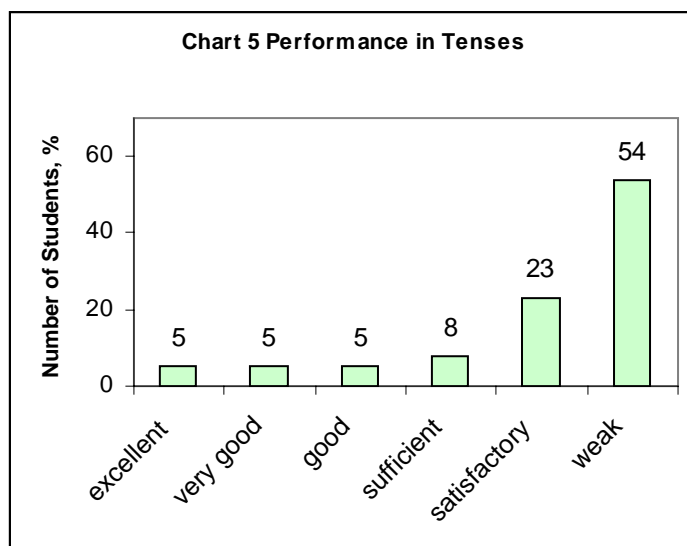


Learners' perception of vocabulary knowledge is revealed through self-assessment of anticipated performance in a vocabulary test, and it is shown in pie chart 4. Only 10% estimate their knowledge of vocabulary accurately. 35% of students misplace themselves by 1 point, and the same number – by 2 points. 20% of learners expect to get higher marks by 3 points. The deviations by 2 or 3 points show how mistaken learners are about their knowledge of ESP vocabulary.

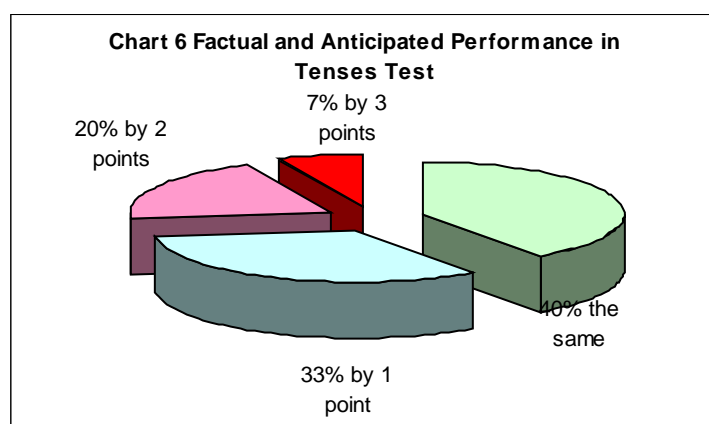


The essence is that just knowing the meaning of the word does not always contribute to accomplishing a gap-filling task. Other criteria such as making decisions about the right part of speech (e.g. a noun, a verb, an adjective, etc.), subject-verb agreement, selecting word networks (ready-made expressions) should be fulfilled. Such challenging tasks demand language awareness from learners who have not developed the ability to reflect on language features yet. Another problem is strategies that learners undertake in reading and writing. One of them is ongoing translation both ways – from English into mother tongue, and vice versa. As a matter of fact, students, at all levels of ability, do translate. In the classroom, translation accelerates dealing with basic vocabulary problems. However, translation in performing writing or reading tasks slows down task completion.

Learners' difficulties in the interrelated reading-writing activities were studied earlier and clarified through self-assessment questionnaires (Kavaliauskienė, 2004). The list of systematized problems in descending order is: unfamiliar vocabulary and lexical phrases, textual organization, sentence structure, tenses, word order. Two major reasons causing these difficulties include, first, inferior level of English basics and, second, ongoing translation in all tasks, starting from reading and finishing with speaking and listening.



Bar chart 5 shows students' factual performance in tests on grammar tenses. Only a few students reveal excellent (5%), very good (5%) and good (5%) application of tenses usage. Over half (54%) are weak at tenses, and the rest are either sufficiently (8%) or satisfactorily (23%) proficient at the usage.



Learners' perception of correct usage of tenses is demonstrated by comparing their factual and anticipated performance in tests. This is shown in pie chart 6. Surprisingly, 40% of respondents are well aware of the use of tenses, while 33% are mistaken in their evaluation by 1 point. 20% of students overvalued their performance by 2 points, and 7% - by 3 points. These findings are quite reasonable knowing how difficult it is for our students to choose the right tense in English, particularly in view of just three existent tenses in learners' native language.

Analyzing participants' performance in literacy skills, some important features have emerged. As it has already been mentioned, initially, 10 students out of 40 were placed as absolute beginners, minimal users, and the rest 30 students as elementary, limited users. Learners faced challenging tasks of learning ESP while they lacked the basics of General English.

In spite of difficulties, some students encompassed their objectives and attained quite remarkable results in writing (26%), in vocabulary (20%), and in grammar tenses (15%). However, a number of learners remained weak or poor: 61% in writing, 65% - in vocabulary, and 54% - in tenses. The causes for setbacks are quite obvious – inability to learn effectively, i.e. not knowing how to learn. Low achievers used inefficient learning strategies they acquired at school, e.g. translating reading texts word by word, not using effective reading strategies and sub-skills, drilling vocabulary items out of context, avoiding making contributions during class activities, etc. One of the most common features of all low achievers has been truancy.

Surprisingly, in self-assessment surveys students emphasize the necessity of frequent testing at a tertiary level because 'tests make students study hard'. From teachers' point of view, tests are a burden and extra work for teachers. In my opinion, it is not the best solution to make learners work hard. Promoting effective learning skills seems to be a much better resort.

Conclusions

The following data have emerged as a result of testing literacy in reading-writing, use of vocabulary and grammar tenses.

Testing students' literacy skills in summarising professional texts revealed typology of errors in writing, among which the most common are flaws in subject-verb agreement, language transfer, spelling mistakes and articles.

In testing usage of ESP vocabulary, it emerged that students' linguistic deficit in reading skills led to failure in tests. Linguistic deficit includes shortage of professional and general vocabulary, underdeveloped awareness of language structures, and ongoing translation of ideas word by word from English into mother tongue in reading, and vice versa in writing.

Ineffective learning strategies acquired at school hinder students' progress in improving literacy skills at a tertiary level.

A possible interpretation of deficiency in ESP literacy may also be caused by the underdeveloped literacy skills in students' native language.

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