



UNIVERSITETI I EVROPËS JUGLINDORE  
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SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

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## Perceptions and Performance: Students' Attitudes towards Academic English Writing

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### Abstract

This research investigates the importance of writing skills in English for academic purposes (EfAP) courses and compares students' responses to their own English writing needs, their ability to perform and their priorities in their foreign language writing. This paper presents quantitative and qualitative research conducted through analysis of a questionnaire and students' written compositions. The survey involved 50 EFL (English as a foreign language) students from different departments of the South East European University of Tetovo, Macedonia aged between 18 and 23 who attended Academic and Advanced Academic English (AE & AAE) classes at the Language Center. The participants composed different types of texts in their foreign language. The findings from the needs analysis questionnaire conducted at the beginning of the courses show that students deemed their written performance as not important and that for them writing was not priority over other language skills. However, the results from their actual work (different genres of writing) showed that students could perform quite well. Moreover, their writing improved, and, by the end of the semester, writing in English was not considered an intimidating process.

**Key words:** *writing skills, academic English, performance, importance, needs analysis*

## Abstrakt

Ky hulumtim heton rëndësinë e aftësive të të shkruarit në gjuhën angleze për qëllime akademike dhe i krahason përgjigjet e studentëve në lidhje me nevojat akademike të të shkruarit në gjuhën angleze, aftësinë e tyre për të shkruar dhe prioritetet në punën e tyre aktuale. Ky punim paraqet hulumtim sasior dhe cilësor të realizuar me instrumente të tilla si: një pyetësor dhe hartime të studentëve të shkruara në zhanre të ndryshme të të shkruarit akademik. Në këtë hulumtim përfshihen pesëdhjetë studentë nga departamente të ndryshme të Universitetit të Evropës Juglindore në Tetovë, Maqedoni, të moshës 18-23 vjeç, të cilët i ndiqnin lëndët *gjuhë angleze akademike* dhe *gjuhë angleze akademike e avancuar* në Qendrën e gjuhëve. Pjesëmarrësit hartuan disa lloje të ndryshme të teksteve në gjuhën angleze. Rezultatet nga pyetësi për analizë të nevojave të studentëve të kryera në fillim të semestrit, tregojnë se studentët e konsiderojnë performancën e tyre të të shkruarit si jo të rëndësishme dhe se të shkruarit nuk qëndron përpara aftësive të tjera gjuhësore. Megjithatë, rezultatet e punës konkrete (të hartuarit e teksteve të zhanreve të ndryshme) tregojnë se studentet janë mjaft të mirë në aftësinë e të shkruarit. Për më tepër, vërehet një përmirësim në të shkruarit dhe vërehet se të shkruarit në gjuhën angleze në fund të dy kurseve të lartpërmendura, nuk konsiderohet si një proces prej të cilit studentët kanë droje.

***Fjalët kyçe:*** *aftësitë e të shkruarit, gjuha angleze akademike, performanca, rëndësi, analizë kërkesash.*

## Апстракт

Во рамките на ова истражување се проучува важноста на вештините за пишување на англиски јазик за академски цели (EfAP) и се споредуваат одговорите на студентите во врска со потребите за пишување на академски англиски јазик, нивната способност за пишување и нивните приоритети во нивната вистинска работа. Овој труд претставува квантитативно и квалитативно истражување, спроведено со инструменти како што се: прашалник и писмени состави на студентите (различни жанрови на академско пишување). Во истражувањето се вклучени педесет студенти од различни оддели на Универзитетот на ЈИЕ во Тетово, Македонија, на возраст меѓу 18 и 23 години, кои присуствуваа на предметите Академски англиски јазик и Напреден академски англиски јазик (АЕ & ААЕ) во Јазичниот центар. Учесниците составија различни типови текстови на англиски јазик. Резултатите од анализата на анкетата за потребите на почетокот на предметите покажаа дека студентите сметаа дека нивните писмени перформанси не беа важни и дека за нив пишувањето не беше пред другите јазични вештини. Меѓутоа, резултатите од актуелната работа (различни жанрови на пишување) покажаа дека студентите се многу добри во однос на способноста за пишување. Покрај тоа, имаше подобрување во нивните перформанси на пишување, а на крајот на гореспомнатите предмети пишувањето на англиски јазик, не се сметаше за застрашувачки процес.

*Клучни зборови:* вештини за пишување, академски англиски јазик, перформанси, значење, анализа на потребите.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to determine whether students' attitudes/beliefs regarding their priorities and performance in writing skills were in correspondence with various compositions they wrote after completing Academic and Advanced Academic English courses. The study measured how Academic English courses changed/impacted students—both in regards to their actual writing, as well as their perceptions about writing. It was evident that what students deemed essential and areas where they performed very well at the beginning of the courses, turned out to be different by the end of the courses. To explain this further, the research findings indicated that students' writing priorities were ranked in higher scales influenced by the improved level of writing performance. So students ranked writing higher because they felt that they wrote better. Also, students' writing apprehension towards writing led to the neglect of writing skills.

The importance of writing skills in English for Academic Purposes was investigated because one of the purposes of Academic and Advanced Academic English courses is to make students aware of the importance of writing as an academic skill throughout education. To be more specific, these courses aim to serve as an introduction to the conventions of English for academic purposes and to help students acquire the skills needed to apply these conventions in their future academic and professional careers.

In practice, many EFL writing teachers are concerned just about the superficial features of writing. Consequently, students are not taught how to write since they are focused only on form and not on meaning and language. This phenomenon seems to be due to an educational system where form is superior to meaning. In particular, when students are asked to write in English during a class, the majority of them do not hesitate to express their state of intimidation and only a small portion of students attempt to produce a written assignment.

## Literature review

Much research has been conducted on the writing and composition processes that student writers carry out. Researchers have come up with appealing and useful methods to improve student writing (Daly, 1978; McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer, 1985; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Pajares and Johnson, 1993; Shell, Colvin, and Bruning, 1995; Shell, Murphy, and Bruning, 1989). However, regardless of the great amount of research and the initiatives to help students in their writing activities, it is not unusual to see students with years of foreign language instruction having considerable difficulty when asked to write for communication in the target language, regardless of their L1 background. Moreover, writing conventionally received less consideration in foreign language acquisition classrooms. Additionally, an examination of the history of L2 and FL instruction showed that while language instruction is an old occupation, teaching L2 and FL writing is relatively a new undertaking (Zen, 2005). From this perspective, "*learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community*" and not simply an individual activity for self-discovery (Silva, 1990, p.16). This new perspective on writing has included innovative approaches for the L2 and FL writing classes. Researchers have deemed it necessary that various academic communication genres be presented to student writers and particular skills such as the combination of different sources, the connection of hypothesis and facts, summing up, response to readings, should be taught in writing classes (Reid, 1993).

Expressing one's ideas in written form accurately and coherently in L2 or FL is a major accomplishment (Celce-Murcia, 1991). The complexity of writing as a task tends to heighten anxiety levels in the students taking the writing courses. This anxiety can often demotivate the student or lead to discouragement and, thus, may result in negative attitudes towards writing (Sharples, 1993). Similarly, a study conducted at Cukurova University in Adana, Turkey (Yavuz and Genc, 1998) implied that despite the methods used, students showed signs of feeling intimidated when faced with the task of writing a text.

The majority of language learners at all levels consider writing as one of the most complex skills to master. This may imply that students are tremendously hesitant and do not have self-efficacy in writing. The term 'writing apprehension' describes "*the tendency of a person to avoid the process of writing-particularly when the work is to be graded in some way*" (Daly and Miller, 1975, p.244).

Another study conducted by Daly (1978) investigated the differences between undergraduate students with low- and high-level writing apprehension. The results implied that students with high levels of writing apprehension consider writing to be unproductive, and that, if possible, these individuals will avoid classes that involve writing assignments. When students are exposed to writing in class, they may reduce writing apprehension, and increase self-efficacy in writing.

Onwuegbuzie (1999) and Pajares & Johnson (1993) claim that writing apprehension has a negative influence on self-efficacy. Similarly Pajares and Valiante's (1996) claim that students' self-efficacy beliefs about writing competence anticipated their writing performance thus affecting the students' writing apprehension in their mother tongue. Pajares & Valiante (1997) concluded that students with high self-efficacy in writing had low levels of writing apprehension. McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer (1985) also came to the conclusion that self-efficacy and writing anxiety were interrelated, through studying essay scores of undergraduate college students. Also, Shell, Murphy & Bruning (1989) examined the writing self-efficacy of undergraduates and found out that there was a considerable connection between students' confidence regarding their writing skills and their general scores on a 20-minute essay.

Well-developed writing skills are highly demanded in the workplace. Unfortunately, despite the apparent significance of such skills in the workplace, students are not prepared to meet the crucial challenges ahead. They are not prepared adequately in schools to write professionally. Consequently, writing has become a neglected life skill (Harder, 2006).

As an element of communicative language learning, languages are usually learnt in a spoken rather than written form. Consequently, listening and speaking are positioned before reading and writing on most language classrooms. The fundamental conception of the communicative approach to language teaching was that speech was the central priority of language learning, not writing. In other words, writing skills have not been emphasized in terms of communicative language skills and, thus, there is no agreement on the manner for teaching writing (Rivers, 1981).

Conversely, it is believed that writing is important when compared with other academic skills. In the academic sphere, in the workplace, and in the society, writing is the medium through which one's work, learning and intellect is judged. The act of writing necessitates that the author be capable of clarifying a complex point to readers and to themselves. Writing

entails that you, the author, foresee your readers' needs. In doing so, you will show your academic flexibility and development. Writing is also a crucial career skill. On the one hand, it is one of the most significant ways to efficiency. On the other hand, it is one of the most overlooked skills in the business world. Regardless of the nature of one's job or profession, the employees depict the employer and the institution itself. It is commonsense that good communication skills are fundamental for any organization and any employer should pay attention to the writing skills of future employees. It is suggested that job applicants should go through writing skills evaluation process parallel with other qualifications (Conrad, n.d).

### **Present study**

Outlined below are the results of the author's survey of students' priorities (needs) and performance (abilities) in writing, undertaken during the spring semester 2011.

### **Research questions**

**Question 1:** What are students' attitudes (needs) towards the importance and performance of writing skills compared to the other skills (reading, speaking, and listening) before taking the courses?

**Question 2:** What is the correlation/rapport between students' needs/attitudes towards writing and their writing performance?

**Question 3:** How have students' attitudes towards the importance of writing and their performance changed by the end of the courses?

### **Methodology**

Fifty EFL students from different departments of the SEE University-Tetovo, Macedonia aged between 18 and 23 years participated in this survey; they all attended Academic and Advanced Academic English courses at the Language Center and composed different genres of writing in their foreign language (English).

### **Instruments**

An adapted questionnaire (Appendix A) on EAP Needs and students' written compositions were used as the database for this study.

### **Procedure**

For the first research question 25 AE students and other 25 AAE students were given the EAP Needs Questionnaire. This questionnaire aimed to investigate students' attitudes (needs) towards the importance and performance of writing skills compared to the other skills (reading, speaking, and listening) before taking the courses. The questionnaire was divided into four sections each of them dealing with an assignable skill (writing, reading, speaking and ended with listening). This questionnaire was conducted in order to find out what were the students' needs, attitudes, priorities and performance regarding the four academic skills

(writing, reading, speaking, and listening). Students could explain their choices only in English within the set time frame of 20 minutes.

The four sections of the questionnaire were divided into two sub-questions requiring students to state how important it was for them to perform the tasks (items) well in English. Students were also required to rate their performance regarding these tasks on a scale from 1 to 4. Students were given the syllabi of the courses and a list of the types of writing activities throughout the semester. The writing assignments consisted of writing a: formal letter, movie review, character analysis, essay, a song and video analysis, reflection paper, creative writing.

The procedure conducted for the 2<sup>nd</sup> research question, consisted of using the data collection from the writing section of the questionnaire. The same data were used in order to allow for a comparison between students' attitudes towards the importance of writing and their perception of their performance in writing. Along with the questionnaire the students' compositions were also analyzed. For each text produced by the student, the instructor provided peer-feedback and conferencing. In this way, both sides (the instructor and the students) could say whether the students' writing skills had improved and whether their attitudes towards the importance of writing compared to other academic skills had changed. In other words, by using continuous assessment detailed information about student attitudes and performance was available, which would later yield reliable results.

At the end of the course, the participants were given just the writing section of the same EAP questionnaire in order to obtain information relating to question 3—how their perceptions had changed. At this stage, the students were asked to rank the tasks according to their importance and performance by providing retrospective verbal answers regarding the extent to which their attitudes and performance regarding writing had shifted. The results of this questionnaire were compared with the results of the initial questionnaire conducted at the beginning of the courses. Also, the evidence of the students' evaluation (continuous assessment) of their writing activities was compared with the results from the last section of the questionnaire conducted.

### Analysis and discussion of the findings

The survey showed that the most important skill identified by the majority of students (76%) was listening, followed by writing (60 % of students), then speaking (56% of students), and then reading (55 % of students). However, the majority of students (74% of students) believed that their highest level of performance was in reading followed by listening (73% of students), speaking (51 % of students) and writing (24% of students) (see Table 1). It was evident that students' needs and abilities regarding writing were not at a high level compared to the other communicative skills (especially their writing performance).

Skills	Importance	Performance
Writing	60%	24%
Reading	55%	74%
Speaking	56%	51%
Listening	76%	73%

**Table 1:** Findings from EAP Needs Questionnaire

The table also illustrates that the students' answers were influenced by their apprehension towards language skills. If students could perform well in a particular skill, they ranked the importance of this skill higher. It is no surprise that students considered writing as the most difficult skill in which to perform. Similarly, it may be suggested that writing might be the most complex skill to teach, compared to other skills since writing generates concrete records that permit countless modifications and that reveal both, technical accuracy and artistic fluency. Writing is also a time consuming process to teach (Kashiwagi and Shimatani, 2007).

Regarding the correlation/rapport between students' needs/attitudes towards writing and their writing performance, findings indicate that the importance of writing was ranked higher by the majority of AE students than the actual performance of the same students. Thirty (16+14) out of 50 students ranked the importance of writing as essential and very important whereas twenty-three (12+11) out of 50 students ranked their actual performance as essential and very important. A similar pattern was found for AAE students, where 43 (26+17) out of 50 students ranked the importance of writing higher whereas 38(24+14) out of 50 students ranked their actual performance as very essential. However, both importance and performance were ranked higher by AAE students than by AE students. In short, students deemed writing as very important, but they couldn't perform at a reasonably high level (see Table 2).

	AE Importance	AE Performance	AAE Importance	AAE Performance
Essential/Very well	16	12	26	24
Very important/Quite well	14	11	17	14
Quite important/Not well	12	23	5	8
Not important/Not at all	8	4	2	4

**Table 2:** Findings regarding the correlation/rapport between students' needs/attitudes towards writing and their writing performance

The results indicate that academic performance is greatly influenced by writing apprehension even in L1 (Pajares and Valiante , 2001). There was an interdependence between the level of performance in academic writing and the students' apprehensive attitudes towards writing. The students' writing accomplishment are influenced by their attitude towards writing in L1 (Graham, Berninger, and Fan, 2007). It is believed that performance is often impeded by apprehension. Thus, students with a low level of writing apprehension are expected to do better in tests of their writing skills (Krause, 1994).

Regarding the change of students' attitudes towards the importance of writing and their performance by the end of the courses, findings showed that 36 (19+17) out of 50 AE students ranked writing as essential and very important whereas 34 (18+16) out of 50 students ranked their actual performance as essential and very important. Similarly, AAE students' writing importance was ranked higher by 45 (28+17) students than their performance ranked by 42 (26+16) students. However, both importance and performance were ranked higher by AAE students compared to AE students. It also became clear that

based on the findings from the questionnaire, by the end of their courses, the students' attitudes towards writing had shifted/changed in a positive way. As can be seen in table 3, there is no item/task that is rated as 'not important' and 'not able to perform'. This shows that the students' attitudes towards the importance of writing and their performance had improved, as compared with their responses illustrated in Table 2. This improvement occurred as a result of the students being involved in writing continually in different genres and by being provided with individual feedback and conferencing. The process of writing was handled in a friendly atmosphere. The teacher had patience to foster and guide students in this process and students' attitude to writing changed from negative to positive. This claim was based on the findings from the third research question, from the continuous feedback, and from evaluation of the students' written tasks. All this led to students' increased attitudes towards writing. Consequently, intimidation and apprehension towards writing started to fade.

	AE Importance	AE Performance	AAE Importance	AAE Performance
Essential/Very well	19	18	28	26
Very important/Quite well	17	16	17	16
Quite important/Not well	14	16	5	8
Not important/Not at all	0	0	0	0

**Table 3:** The change of students' attitudes towards the importance of writing and their performance by the end of the courses

## Conclusion

This paper examined students' perceptions on the importance of writing skills in English for academic purposes. The main focus was to look at students' attitudes (needs) towards the importance of writing skills, as well as their performance in writing compared to the other academic skills (reading, speaking, and listening) before and after taking the courses. It examined the correlation/rapport between students' needs/attitudes towards writing and their writing performance. Also, this paper looked at the change in students' attitudes towards the importance of writing, and the change in their performance by the end of the courses.

The main findings of this research showed that students deemed their written performance as not important and that writing was not priority over other language skills. However, the results from their actual written work (comprised of different genres of writing) show that students could perform quite well in writing. Moreover, there was an improvement in their writing performance, and by the end of the courses, writing in English was not as intimidating. Also, students' writing apprehension was diminished by the end of the courses since students had gone through the process of various types of academic writing. At this stage students were more confident regarding their writing needs, abilities, and priorities.

To be more specific, it was shown that on a scale from 1-4, writing skills were ranked third regarding performance and second in terms of importance. Moreover, it was shown that AE and AAE students ranked writing importance higher than performance, whereas both importance and performance were ranked relatively higher by AAE students compared to AE



students. Students deemed writing as important, but they could not perform in writing at a more advanced level. These conclusions point to the academic performance which is influenced to a great extent by writing apprehension and attitudes towards writing. Furthermore, it was shown that after the completion of Academic and Advanced Academic English courses, the students' attitudes and performance changed. The students' compositions showed signs of real progress in writing skills. As a result, the findings from the last questionnaire conducted show that students' attitudes towards the importance of writing had been influenced by their level of performance. AE and AAE students ranked the importance of writing higher than their performance. However, both the importance of writing and performance were ranked higher by AAE students compared to AE students.

These conclusions suggest that several steps should be taken, to encourage students regarding perceptions of their writing performance. The first would be to set up writing centers in schools and universities. Second, there should be more Academic and Advanced Academic writing classes in university level which would help students in developing their academic writing skills. Third, there should be more attention paid to writing skills in primary and secondary schools aimed at promoting writing skills. Generally speaking, the students' writing skills improve only through writing. If students do not consider it important and if teachers avoid teaching writing, because it is hard and since it seems intimidating for students, students will not learn to write adequately.

### **Limitations and recommendations of the present study**

It should be noted that in addition to its theoretical and practical importance, this paper also has some limitations. The participants of this study worked under time pressure as every task they conducted took place in the classroom, which has commonly known time constraints. Moreover, the number of participants was only 50 and the results do not provide a sound enough basis for generalizing comments. If more groups at AE and AAE level were involved, more accurate results would be possible.

Similarly, recommendations for further studies in this area can be made. Future researchers interested in this area could involve more participants with different levels of English performance. Also, students' perceptions and performance regarding EFL writing might be investigated throughout continuous data collection before, during and after the conferencing sessions with tutors at the writing centers.

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## Appendix A

**EAP Needs**

Use the following table to find out what your academic English language needs are and your ability in each area. You can then work out your priorities.

<b>WRITING</b>	How important is it for you to perform these tasks well in English?				How well can you perform these tasks in English?			
	Not important	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not at all	Not well	Quite well	Very well
1. Essays								
2. Case studies								
3. Reports (of experiments etc)								
4. Other research reports								
5. Reflective writing								
6. Literature review								
7. Other assignments								
8. Practical writing (eg letters)								
9. Workbook exercises								
10. Exam answers (short answers)								
11. Exam answers (1 or 2 paragraphs)								
12. Exam answers (longer than 2 paragraphs)								
13. Group projects								
14. Research proposal								
15. Writing grammatically								
16. Linking sentences in writing								
17. Creating well structured paragraphs								
18. Acknowledging sources								
19. Writing a list of references								
20. Avoiding plagiarism								
21. Developing an argument								
22. Writing summaries								
23. Writing descriptions								
24. Writing introductions and conclusions								
25. Organizing and								

planning writing								
26. Spelling								
27. Punctuation								
28. Finding your voice								
29. Use of appropriate style								
30. Handwriting								
31. Choosing appropriate vocabulary								
32. Other writing activity (please specify)								

READING	How important is it for you to perform these tasks well in English?				How well can you perform these tasks in English?			
	Not important	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not at all	Not well	Quite well	Very well
1. Reading textbooks								
2. Reading journal articles								
3. Reading magazine or newspaper articles								
4. Reading works of literature								
5. Reading handouts								
6. Reading workbook instructions								
7. Reading laboratory or computer manuals								
8. Reading texts forming part of exam questions.								
9. Reading to get specific information for assignments								
10. Reading to check information								
11. Reading for clarification								
12. Reading to support a position								
13. Reading to establish and evaluate author's position								
14. Reading critically								
15. Reading quickly and efficiently								
16. Understanding vocabulary								
17. Reading aloud								

18. Reading and answering questions								
20. Taking notes								
21. Other reading activity (please specify)								

SPEAKING	How important is it for you to perform these tasks well in English?				How well can you perform these tasks in English?			
	Not important	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not at all	Not well	Quite well	Very well
1. Asking questions in class								
2. Answering questions in class								
3. Speaking in groups								
4. Speaking and listening								
5. Speaking to class (e.g. Reporting results)								
6. Giving presentations								
7. Discussing academic problems with staff								
8. Discussing personal problems with staff								
9. Working with other students								
10. Practical speaking (e.g. telephone)								
11. Speaking in oral exams								
12. Speaking accurately								
13. Pronunciation								
14. Speaking fluently								
15. Other speaking activity (please specify)								

<b>LISTENING</b>	How important is it for you to perform these tasks well in English?				How well can you perform these tasks in English?			
	Not important	Quite important	Very important	Essential	Not at all	Not well	Quite well	Very well
1. Listening in lectures								
2. Listening in seminars and discussions								
3. Listening to recorded speech								
4. Following instructions								
5. Watching films/videos								
6. Understanding main points								
7. Listening to get specific information for assignments								
8. Listening to establish and evaluate speaker's position								
9. Listening quickly and efficiently								
10. Understanding vocabulary								
11. Listening and answering questions								
12. Listening to different accents								
13. Taking notes								
14. Other listening activity (please specify)								