

WRITING FOR ONE'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper explores higher education practice in developing academic writing skills with Applied Modern Languages third year students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania. The case study presents seminar activities designed to enhance sentence, phrase, paragraph and essay-level writing abilities, as well as the role of peer and tutor feedback. This set of activities is seen as relevant not just for academic performance (elaborating one's graduation paper, for instance), but also for professional performance.

Keywords: academic writing skills, Applied Modern Languages, academic and professional development, writing skills for the labour market.

1. Preliminary remarks

The paper aims to present practical means of developing students' academic writing skills, as undertaken with Applied Modern Languages third year students at the Faculty of International Business and Economics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania (ASE). We describe classwork and homework activities aimed at reviewing and further developing skills in writing sentences, phrases, paragraphs and essays; then, we present the results of a questionnaire analysis on students' perceptions on the role of obtaining and providing feedback on writing activities. Academic writing skills will be shown to be relevant not just for successfully completing the requirements of academic disciplines, but also for students' and graduates' professional careers, as well as for their personal development.

2. The need for academic writing skills

2.1 Writing skills for the academic environment

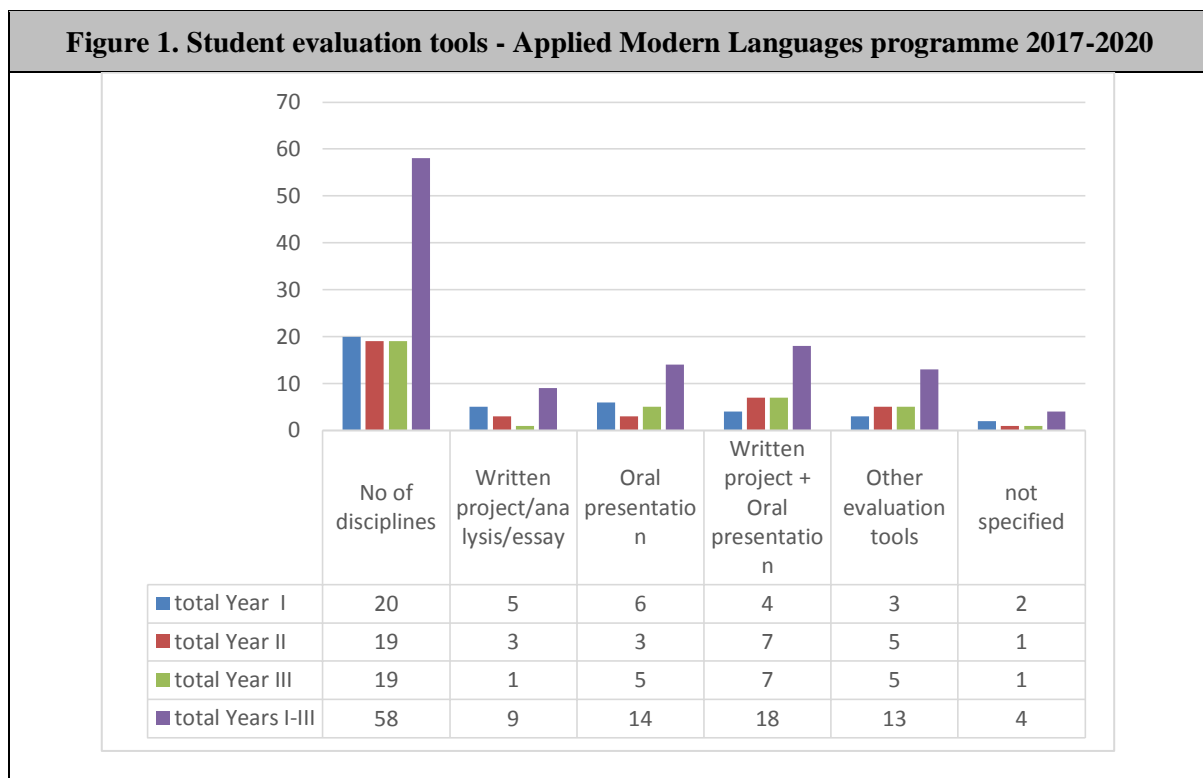
In order to assess the need for academic writing skills for students participating in the Applied Modern Languages Bachelor's programme organized by the Faculty of International

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Business and Economics from ASE, we have examined the curricula for all the 58 disciplines in the curriculum for 2017-2020, selecting the evaluation tools used by academics in order to determine successful completion of each of the disciplines (cf. 2017-2020. “Fișe de disciplină...” [“Syllabi”]). We have noticed that, apart from oral or written exams and attendance requirements, students are also required to complete a variety of assignments, such as: written projects and/or oral presentations, most frequently, and other types of assignments, such as written and/or oral seminar tests, homework files, translations and glossaries, role plays and simulations, problem solving etc. Figure 1 below summarizes the data from the syllabi.

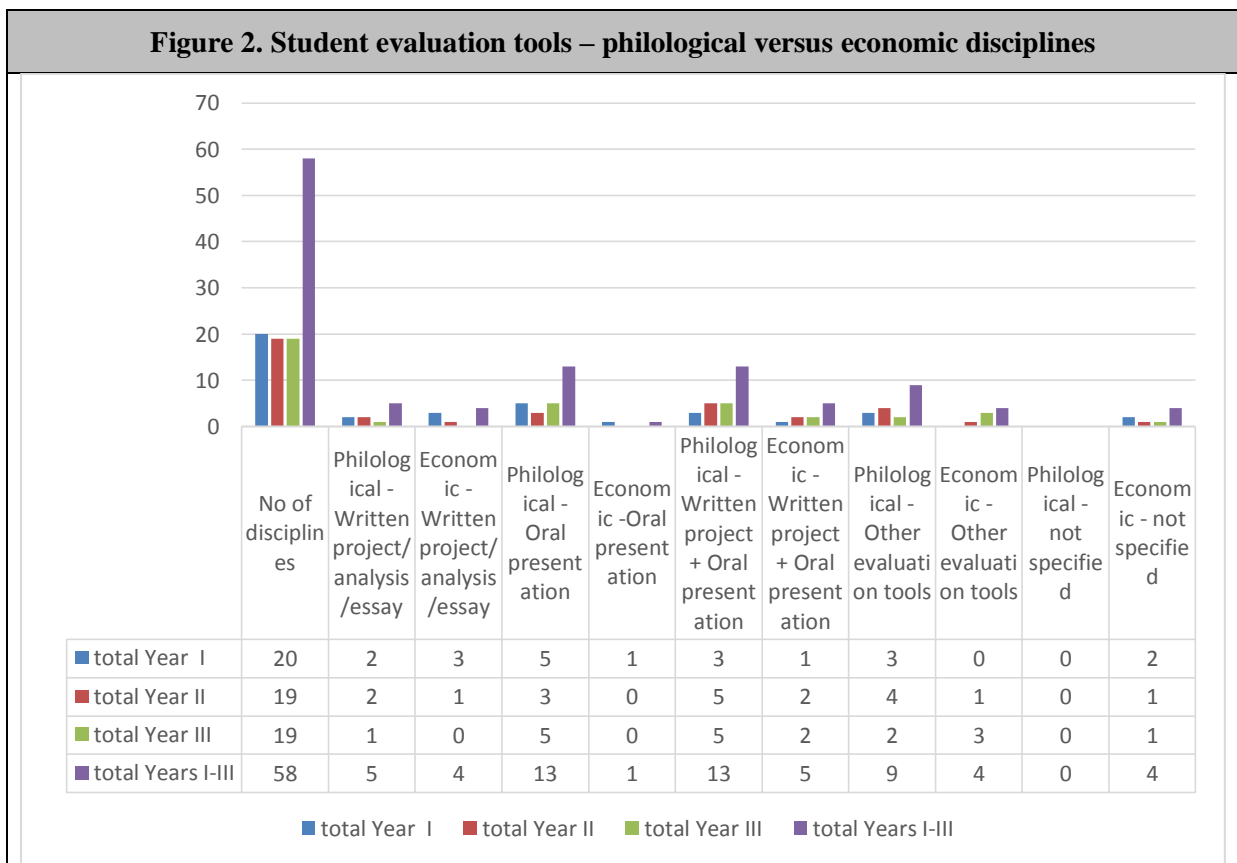
By examining Figure 1 below, we notice that 18 out of 58 disciplines (roughly 31%) require students to deliver written projects and oral presentations, 14 disciplines (24%) require oral presentations, and 9 disciplines (15%) require written projects for the successful completion of the academic discipline. Irrespective of whether written projects are requested alone or in combination with oral presentations, they make up for up to 46% of successful completion requirements of the academic disciplines in the curriculum.



In what concerns the distribution of student evaluation tools across types of disciplines, Figure 2 below shows philological versus economic academics’ choices. Before examining these choices, let us briefly describe the architecture of the curriculum. From the total amount of 58 disciplines, 18 disciplines (31%) are economic subjects, such as: Accounting, Business Law, Entrepreneurship, Geopolitics, International Economics, Financial Markets, Human Resources, Management, Marketing, Public Relations etc. The remaining 40 disciplines (69%) are philological disciplines, dealing mainly with English and French language, culture and civilization, as well as with translation studies, academic writing, professional communication, or qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

As regards the distribution of student evaluation tools, we notice that 49% of the economic disciplines seem to favour written projects either alone – 4 out of 18 disciplines (22%) – or in

combination with oral presentations - 5 out of 18 disciplines (27%). Moreover, 4 out of 18 economic disciplines (22%) resort to other evaluation tools, such as problem solving, role plays and simulations, or written and/or oral seminar tests. On the other hand, 64% of the philological disciplines seem to favour oral presentations either alone – 13 out of 40 disciplines (32%) – or in combination with written projects – other 13 out of 40 disciplines (32%). Furthermore, 9 out of 40 philological disciplines (22%) resort to other evaluation tools, such as written and/or oral seminar tests, homework files, translations and glossaries, role plays and simulations. When examining the weight of written projects among the evaluation tools employed by the two types of disciplines, we notice that written evaluation tools are used by 49% of the economic disciplines, and by 45% of the philological disciplines.



Given the data analyzed in Figures 1 and 2 above, we may safely conclude that the ability to properly elaborate written projects positively impacts upon Applied Modern Languages students’ successful completion of both philological and economic disciplines in the Bachelor’s curriculum. Section 3 below provides a detailed scenario for developing and reinforcing students’ academic writing skills.

2.2 Writing skills for the professional environment

Researchers have investigated the skills demanded by the labour market nowadays and have pointed to the fact that

Data confirm that the shift towards a knowledge-based digital economy is already under way and that governments, workers and firms altogether face many challenges ahead. Results show that skill demands have gradually shifted towards a more intensive use of cognitive and

interpersonal skills and that high-skilled occupations are in strong demand across most OECD countries. (Manca 2018: 2)

Among the skills and knowledge under consideration, Manca (2018: 16-17) mentions: transversal skills (e.g. complex problem solving, troubleshooting, programming etc.), “reading comprehension, writing and speaking but also critical thinking or active listening and learning” skills, as well as knowledge of clerical and administrative procedures. Quintini (2014: 21) provides examples of writing tasks that employees engage in: “letters, memos, e-mails, reports, forms”. Moreover, it appears that “ICT, reading, writing, problem-solving and influence skills are often used together at work” (idem: 25ff). Furthermore, “labour productivity and the use of reading and writing skills are positively and statistically significantly correlated” (idem: 26). “Similarly, the use of information-processing skills, such as writing, familiarity with ICTs and problem solving, is positively and significantly correlated with wages” (idem: 35).

Quintini (2014) and Manca (2018) are just two instances of the plethora of studies on what the 21st century globalized labour market demands. Yet, they suffice to highlight the important role writing skills play on the job market, which is an incentive for any student/graduate aspiring to become a true professional, irrespective of their field of study.

3. Developing academic writing skills – a practical account

Applied Modern Languages students from ASE are explicitly exposed to academic writing techniques during their first and third years of Bachelor’s studies, by means of the disciplines entitled “Academic communication and study skills” and “Discourse analysis”, respectively. During the first year, the aim is to familiarize students with the writing techniques and text genres that they are expected to master and produce throughout their student years. During the third year, the aim is to help students reflect on their experience as academic writers and enhance it so as to successfully elaborate their graduation papers and to think ahead, of how such experience and skills can be capitalized upon on the labour market. In what follows, we only refer to the academic writing activities that students are involved in during the “Discourse analysis” third year discipline in their Applied Modern Languages Bachelor’s curriculum (a discipline taught so far by Viorela Dima).

3.1 Classwork and homework academic writing activities

Since its launch in 2013, the Applied Modern Languages program from ASE has produced 4 classes of alumni. The experience gained with these alumni has shown that there is indeed need for a thorough revision of the academic writing techniques, revision which helps students increase awareness of key aspects such as: documentation, paper writing, source citation and plagiarism avoidance. Therefore, it has been decided to include this thorough review among the topics covered by the “Discourse analysis” third year discipline, alongside issues like corpus-based research, methods, models and samples of discourse analysis.

The academic writing revision uses Savage and Shafiei (2007 a.,b.) as a starting point for practicing sentence, phrase, paragraph and essay-level writing abilities. Table 1 below summarizes the types of activities practiced with third year students:

Table 1. Academic writing activities in Savage and Shafiei (2007 a.,b.)

- Sentence and Paragraph level:
 - formatting;
 - paragraph organization into topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences;
 - unity and coherence;
 - rhetorical focus – presenting ideas function of time, space and order of importance
 - simple and compound sentence structure;
 - punctuation and capitalization;
 - editing for fragments and run-on sentences.
- Essay level:
 - essay organization into introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion;
 - introduction organization into hook, background information, thesis statement;
 - unity and coherence – identifying irrelevant sentences;
 - simple and compound sentence structure, main and dependent clauses;
 - punctuation and capitalization;
 - editing for fragments and run-on sentences.

Next, students are involved in essay writing and rewriting on a topic chosen from a list provided by the teacher. The topics on the list are of general interest (so that the need for specialised knowledge and extensive documentation may not hinder the choice) and are usually worded as an invitation for argumentation. Table 2 below illustrates some of the topics students may choose from:

Table 2. Topics for academic essays

What is better – landline or mobile phone technology and why?
Should parents restrict their children’s use of mobile technology?
Is long distance learning as good as on campus learning?
Do home-schooled children stand the same chances as those attending regular schools?
Will computers replace teachers?
How much freedom should students get in choosing their courses, assessment methods, schedule etc.?
What makes an ideal teacher?
Paperback versus electronic books – which are better and why?
What to you prefer and why - to read books or to listen to them?
Is reading literature becoming obsolete?
Are copyright laws too strict with respect to the online sharing of music, films etc.?
Does language matter in music artists’ attempts to be successful at international level?
Is Mother Tongue Plus 2 a too ambitious project for Europe?
Business to client relationships are best maintained by Facebook pages.
Should global companies pay more taxes in the offshore destination countries?
Is the use of police violence ever necessary?
Should immigrant children be included in regular schools or in special schools?
Should everybody be given the chance to vote in the next general elections? Why or why not?

Table 2. Topics for academic essays

What can media do to influence people’s characters to the better?

The writing and rewriting takes place in class during three seminars and at home, as follows: during the *first writing seminar*, students pick a theme from the list, identify the topic and controlling ideas, jot down ideas for their paragraphs and try to decide on a logical sequencing for their ideas; during the *second writing seminars*, they come with several copies of their first essay draft, which they exchange with colleagues to obtain peer feedback on a series of criteria that are going to be listed below; during the *third writing seminars*, they come with several copies of their second (improved) essay draft, which they exchange with colleagues to obtain peer feedback on the same set of criteria; at the fourth seminar, they hand in their final improved essay version to the teacher for evaluation according to the same criteria.

The criteria used for evaluation are given in Table 3 below. Mention should be made that students do not grade peers based on the respective criteria, they only provide positive comments and suggestions for improvement in the ‘negative comments’ column.

Table 3. Feedback criteria for student essays

criteria	Positive comments	Negative comments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the structure of the paragraphs (topic sentence, supporting ideas, conclusion) - the structure of the essay (introduction, body, conclusion) - the soundness of argumentation - the language used (grammar, word order, vocabulary, register and style) - the editing (spelling, punctuation, justified margins etc.) 		

As evident from Table 3 above, the criteria used to provide feedback on essays reflect and recycle the sentence, phrase, paragraph and essay-level writing activities undertaken initially. As for the grading of the essays, the teacher is the only one to do so, in view of granting students a mark which counts towards 10% of their final mark for the “Discourse analysis” discipline. Grading comprises two steps: first, the criteria in Table 3 are used to evaluate students’ last improved essay version; second, the students’ own activity during all the three essay writing seminars is taken into account – both the quality of one’s own essay versions, and the conscientiousness in offering peer feedback, as illustrated in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Teacher final grading grill for student essays

Version 1 3 points			Version 2 3 points			Version 3 4 points			Total 10 points
attendance	own version	peer review	attendance	own version	peer review	attendance	own version	peer review	

Although extremely time consuming – as it takes all together 5 seminars for student practice in academic writing techniques and in essay writing and reviewing, and roughly 2 further weeks for teacher grading – these activities are well worth the effort. At least, this is the impression one gets when analysing the responses students provide to the questionnaire designed to elicit their opinions on the matter.

3.2 Questionnaire analysis - student opinion on the role of peer feedback

Since student opinions are extremely useful in calibrating teaching options, at the end of the semester (roughly 2 months after the academic writing module was completed), students were invited to fill in an anonymous open-ended questionnaire rendered in Table 5 below. As evident from their responses, such activities impact upon their personal and academic development in a variety of ways.

Table 5. Open ended questionnaire on Student opinion on the role of peer feedback
<p style="text-align: center;">Reflect on your experience related to the essay writing seminars during the semester. Write no more than a page, answering the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In what way was attendance to the three essay writing seminars useful to you? 2. Which of the five evaluation criteria did you find easiest to meet in your own essay? (evaluation criteria - the structure of paragraphs, the structure of the essay, the soundness of argumentation, the language used, the editing) 3. Which of the five evaluation criteria did you find most difficult to meet in your own essay? 4. Was the feedback received from colleagues on your essay helpful to improve it? If yes, how? If no, why? 5. Was the feedback you gave to colleagues in any way helpful to you? If yes, how? If no, why?

Table 6 below epitomizes the most frequent answers provided to *Question 1. In what way was attendance to the three essay writing seminars useful to you?*. We notice students' perceptions that they have improved one's own academic writing skills, as well as personal and interpersonal aspects (self-esteem, attitude towards criticism and hard work, attitude towards others):

Table 6. Answers to Question 1. In what way was attendance to the three essay writing seminars useful to you?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - was able to better structure my own essay; - improved argumentation skills; - saw my own mistakes and was able to correct them; - improved language – grammaticality, accuracy, formality; - learned to consider my readers' opinions; - different perspectives on the same topic; - different styles of writing; - shared ideas with colleagues; - became aware of the need for hard work; - improved critical thinking; - put theory into practice; - learned a new method to evaluate/ analyse and self-evaluate.

Figures 3 and 4 below capture the answers provided to *Question 2. Which of the five evaluation criteria did you find easiest to meet in your own essay?* and *Question 3. Which of the five evaluation criteria did you find most difficult to meet in your own essay?*, respectively. We notice that paragraph and essay structure are perceived as the **easiest** aspects to master, while the soundness of argumentation is perceived as the **most difficult** aspect to master.

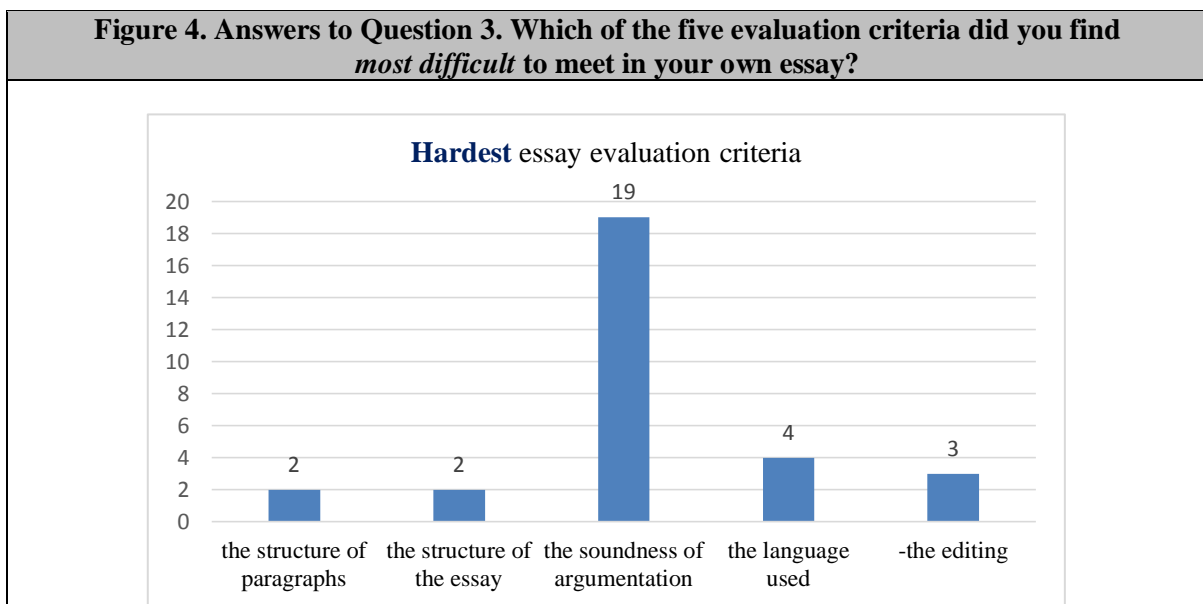
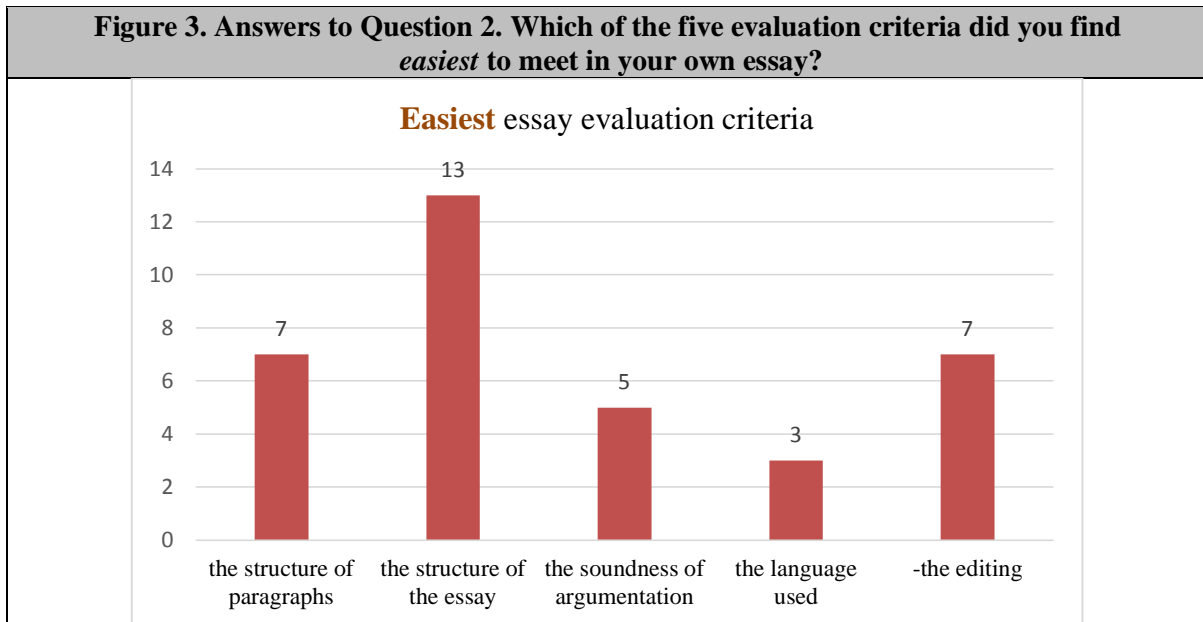


Figure 5 renders students' responses to *Question 4. Was the feedback received from colleagues on your essay helpful to improve it? If yes, how? If no, why?.* We notice that peer feedback seems to have helped students improve mostly the language used (i.e. English), and the soundness of argumentation, with less impact on the other essay evaluation criteria. Other aspects that students highlighted are: 'colleagues pointed to things I overlooked or I thought to be perfect but could be improved', colleagues provided 'different points of view' on the

topic of choice or ‘constructive’, ‘fair’, ‘objective’ feedback. Very rarely was it the case that peer feedback was perceived as ‘irrelevant’.

Figure 5. Answers to Question 4. Was the feedback received from colleagues on your essay helpful to improve it? If yes, how? If no, why?

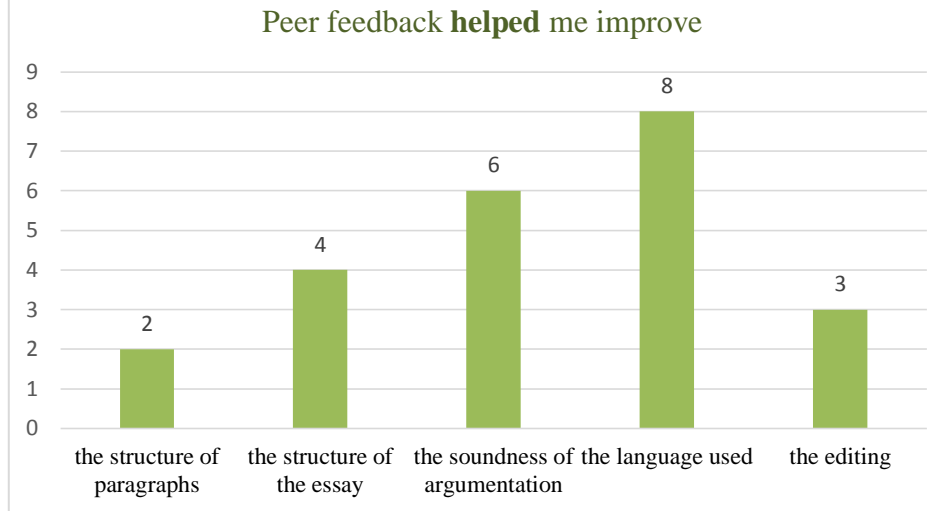


Table 7 below lists the most frequent answers received for *Question 5. Was the feedback you gave to colleagues in any way helpful to you? If yes, how? If no, why?*. Again, we notice that academic writing seminars help improve students’ academic writing skills (essay structure, argumentation, grammar usage etc.), critical thinking skills, personal and interpersonal competences (attitude towards criticism and hard work, attitude towards others):

Table 7. Answers to Question 5. Was the feedback you gave to colleagues in any way helpful to you? If yes, how? If no, why?

- was able to better structure my own essay;
- improved argumentation skills;
- saw my own mistakes and was able to correct them;
- improved language – grammaticality, accuracy, formality;
- learned to consider my readers’ opinions;
- different perspectives on the same topic;
- different styles of writing;
- shared ideas with colleagues;
- became aware of the need for hard work;
- improved critical thinking;
- put theory into practice;
- learned a new method to evaluate/ analyse and self-evaluate.

As evident from students’ answers to the open-ended anonymous questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester, academic writing activities are seen as useful for improving: one’s own writing abilities, evaluation and self-evaluation abilities, attitude towards own hard work, attitude towards others’ hard work. Moreover, peer feedback is seen as useful both when given and when received: apart from improving academic writing skills, it also contributes to the improvement of critical thinking skills, self-esteem, and respect towards peers.

4. Conclusions

The current paper has provided details on how the “Discourse analysis” discipline from the (third year) curriculum of the Bachelor’s program in Applied Modern Languages organized by the Faculty of International Business and Economics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania (ASE) contributes to the development of students’ academic writing skills. We have pointed to the fact that lengthy and time-consuming activities are necessary to review and practice sentence, phrase, paragraph and essay-level writing techniques, but that this time and effort is perceived by students as well spent. The usefulness of such activities is seen at personal, interpersonal and academic level, as they help participants increase self-esteem, critical thinking skills, attitude and respect towards peers and academic requirements.

Apart from helping students successfully complete one of the complex assignments requested to pass the “Discourse analysis” discipline this exercise is occasioned by, enhanced academic writing skills are indeed useful for other disciplines in the curricula, be they philological or economic. As section 2.1 above has pointed out, properly tackled writing tasks is beneficial for 46% of the academic disciplines in the Applied Modern Languages Bachelor’s curriculum.

Moreover, enhanced writing skills are also extremely useful for students’ and graduates’ success on the labour market. As mentioned in the studies cited in section 2.2 above, writing skills are highly demanded, as they contribute, among other things, to workers’ increased productivity and increased job satisfaction (generated by higher wages).

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