Eszterházy Károly Catholic University

Doctoral School of Education Science

Head of Doctoral School:
Prof. dr. Béla Pukánszky, DSc.

Program Director of Doctoral School:
Dr. habil. Zoltán Szűts

Szilvia Rási

ACADEMIC WRITING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL STUDY OF THE THESIS AS A PEDAGOGICAL GENRE

THESES FOR DOCTORAL THESIS (PHD)

Supervisor:
Dr. habil. Ágnes Domonkosi

Eger, 2023

Table of contents

1. Introduction

The expansion of higher education can be observed all over the world, especially since the second half of the 20th century. Nowadays in Hungary - as in other countries - the framework for the activities of higher educational institutions is defined by law. According to the law on higher education students in bachelor and master programmes complete their studies by writing and defending their thesis and diploma work. Thus, in higher education, it is expected, or rather required, that students´ academic writing skills are at a high level, so they can present a well-structured text describing their own research, in accordance with the criteria of scientific style at the end of their studies. In parallel it is also evidence (eg. Arum–Roksa 2011; Blaskó–Hamp 2007; Doró 2012; Gruber–Huemer 2016; Kurtán 2010; Szilassy 2014), that students' academic writing skills are inadequate. This is partly due to their previous studies and partly to their higher education.

The research of students' academic writing is also justified by the fact that although there are courses in Hungarian higher education that focus on academic writing, the knowledge acquired here does not sufficiently prepare students for the writing of academic texts, because these texts are still of low quality in many cases (Rási 2019).

2. The objectives of the research

In defining the research problem, I choose topic that is important and under-researched in Hungary, and whose investigation contributes to the development of the field. This is why the central research problem of the present study is to find out the reasons for the various deficiencies in students' academic writing, even though they have many possibilities to develop their academic writing, moreover they are given a set of requirements for some of their academic texts.

Therefore, the main aim of the research is to explore the characteristics of students' academic writing, to analyse the theses guidelines and requirements, and to map and compare the experiences of teachers and students. The results and the conclusions of the research can contribute to the development of students' scientific writing by integrating the experience into the aids and courses of academic writing, as well as into the requirements for students' academic writing, such as institutional documents. In order to gain a more detailed and nuanced picture of topic, it was essential to examine the three main areas connected to the students´ academic writing: it was essential to analyse the academic texts written by the student, the institutional requirements that define students' academic work,

and to examine the experiences and opinions of both students and teachers regarding students' academic writing.

3. Structure of the thesis

The thesis contains the following main units. After a brief introduction, the theoretical background of the research is presented. In literature review, I present both Hungarian and international studies and findings closely related to the present research, including literacy, text production and different theories of text types. This is followed by the pedagogy of higher education, the disciplinary definition of higher education, its aims and its main output requirements. Academic writing occurs in both academic and scientific discourse spaces, and since the research focuses on students' academic writing, the further subsections of the theoretical part focus on academic writing in the higher education discourse space: the academic writing produced by students during and at the end of their studies.

The second section of the work describes the methods used in the research and the computer software used for the analysis.

The next part of the thesis describes the primary research. Regarding the genre of the thesis, it can be stated that usually there is a contradiction between the prescriptions, requirements and the texts produced, which was the reason of the research of both institutional expectations and practice. Among the primary research, the thesis first presents the results of the questionnaire survey of teachers and students, as it was important to map the experiences and opinions of both groups regarding academic writing of students. This is followed by the content analysis of the theses written by the students. Finally, the results of the document analysis of the institutional requirements of the thesis are presented.

After that the work presents three more studies that contribute to the exploration of the topic. This chapter describes three research that chronologically precede the primary research. The first research examines the students' habits of creating titles and keyword use. The second research used a questionnaire method to explore students' attitude towards the academic titles and academic texts. The third research analysed a corpus of academic texts written by students during their studies.

Finally, the general lessons and results on students' academic text production are summarised in the chapter entitled *Conclusion*.

4. Method

The dissertation belongs to the mixed methods research as uses of both qualitative and quantitative methods such as content analysis of students' academic texts, document analysis of institutional thesis requirements, and questionnaire survey of teachers' and students' attitudes (see Table 1).

Year	Focus	Method	N (sample)	
2018	Examining titles and keywords	Questionnaire	96 students 11 teachers	**Supplementary research**
2019	Examining students' attitudes towards scientific texts	Questionnaire	161 students	
2020	Examining seminar papers	Content analysis	10 pcs + 10 pcs	
2021 2022	Examining teachers' and students' opinions on scientific texts	Questionnaire	231 teachers 131 students	**Main research**
2022	Analysis of the requirements for the thesis	Document analysis	20 documents	
2021	Examination of theses written by students (pilot study)	Content analysis	5 pcs	
2022	Examination of theses written by students	Content analysis	8 pcs	

Table 1: The network of sub-studies in the dissertation research

As it can be seen in Table 1, the research of students' academic writing is made up of several sub-research: each problem is approached from a different perspective. Basically, three directions were observed that support the researched topic from three aspects: the students´ academic texts (marked with blue), the attitudes and experiences (marked with yellow) and the prescription, requirements (marked with green). These investigations can be divided into two broad categories: main research and supplementary research (three supplementary research chronologically preceded three main research). For the analysis of the data, I used different computer software, according to the type of data: SPSS, MAXQDA and Atlas.ti.

5. Results

5.1. Questionnaire survey

First of all, I mapped and compared the experiences and opinions of teachers and students, because – I believe – it is important to approach the topic from the practice. The sample of the two questionnaire surveys consisted of N=231 lecturers and N=131 students. The results clearly show that lecturers tend to receive academic work from their students that does not meet all the criteria of academic writing.

In general, teachers believe that the primary reason for students' poor quality academic texts is students' lack of experience. Inexperience was taken to mean reading and writing academic texts. In their opinion, reading scientific texts develops knowledge of scientific text types, helps to learn the terminology of the different disciplines and also helps to interpret scientific texts. The questionnaire survey also revealed the importance that teachers attach to a particular aspect (such as spelling, adherence to formal requirements, objectivity, adequate use of vocabulary etc.). The results also show that lecturers are more rigorous in assessing of theses than of coursework.

Further responses from students revealed the difficulties they experience when writing academic texts. Searching and finding literature and sources is (one of) the biggest problems they have. Based on the responses it can be stated that students are not very experienced in searching for scientific texts and are not familiar with the platforms and databases where they can find suitable (and ever free) literature. In addition to this, there is also the problem of understanding the rules of citation and referencing. It has become clear that they are familiar with the concept of plagiarism, and they also know that they must cite in order to avoid plagiarism, but they are often unable to do so because they are not clear about when, how, to whom to cite.

According to the students' responses, the greatest help for them while producing academic texts is usually when someone (primarily the teacher) shows them the relevant literature on their topic. In addition, a sample text that illustrates the paper to be written is more helpful for them than a guide detailing the formal requirements. It is also helpful for students' if someone (e.g. a tutor, a supervisor, a thesis supervisor) reviews and comments the texts they are working on.

In addition to this I mapped the academic genres in which students write in their courses and they have experience with. The results show that teachers most often ask from their students seminar papers and reports. Research design, essay and paper are less

frequently seen as course requirements. Students' responses indicate that they do not write any abstracts, reports, reviews, critiques, excerpts, scientific articles, and discussion papers at their courses. This is important because students can't have practice and experience of various scientific genres if they typically use only one or two genres.

5.2 Content analysis

The content analysis method was used to analyse students' academic texts. A total of N=8 theses were analysed using MAXQDA 2020 software. The results show that one of the main problems of the texts is the presence of spelling and grammatical errors. The most common spelling errors are incorrect use of hyphens, commas, and the fact whether certain words should be written separately or together. In addition, grammatical errors such as subject-verb agreement and the use of missing or inappropriate conjugations are common.

The data also confirmed students' feedback that they have difficulties with the citation, because 28% of the references formally were not correct and 20% of the reference missed.

The results of the research also show that in many cases students do not refer to visuals (tables, graphs, pictures) in the text. It can be observed that students often just insert the given graph/table/picture without adding any interpretation, explanation, or commentary, so it is not an integral part of the text according to the criteria of academic writing.

The text organisation in the theses was typically subjective in tone, as 64% of the metapragmatic indications of text organisation intersected with the personal deixis.

5.3. Document analysis

In addition to the above it was also essential to analyse the regulations and requirements instructing the theses. The database was composed of N=20 documents (namely the Organizational and operational rules, the Studies and Exams Code, and the thesis guidelines published by the faculties, institutes and departments on the official university website). One of the most striking results is the predominance of instructions on formal requirements over linguistic instructions. However, it is important to note that the assessment of a thesis is not only determined by the formal appearance of the work, but also by other features (e.g. language, wording, structure, etc.) that are – closely – related to the content. From these results, it can be concluded that the thesis guidelines focus primarily on

the formal requirements of the thesis, as they are detailed, while other (e.g. linguistic) requirements are not specified.

The data also show that most of the documents list the main parts of the thesis, but far fewer explain the content requirements for each part, because only two documents included content requirements. The fact that requirements of the content are not concretised does not sufficiently support students' academic writing and the proper development of the thesis.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the research was to gain a nuanced understanding of students' academic writing by exploring the experiences and attitudes of teachers and students towards academic writing, by examining the institutional thesis requirements of Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, and by analysing the corpus of thesis written by university students.

The analysis of the theses shows that there are elements in the students' academic papers that meet the criteria of academic writing. In terms of titles the students tend to create brief, thematic main titles and subtitles, and they also pay attention to the structuring of the papers and using of the main content units (such as introduction, theoretical overview, research methodology, analysis, presentation of results, etc.). They also define the basic concepts and the abbreviations use consistently.

In addition, there are also elements in the theses that deviate from the criteria of academic writing and need to be improved. While teaching them academic writing, for example, more emphasis should be placed on spelling and grammar, on the reflection of visual elements in the text, and on the rules of reference and citation.

Finally, theses also contain elements which differ (to some extent) from the criteria of academic writing, but these are not necessarily a fault, these rather show the specificity of the thesis. These are, for example, a personal tone or text organisation merged with personal tone. However, based on the results presented above it would be important in the future that courses and materials that develop students' academic writing skills place even more emphasis on spelling and grammatical correctness, reference to visual elements, and understanding and clarifying the rules of citation, reference.

According to results of the document analysis of thesis guidelines the formal requirements are many more than the linguistic and content instructions. This distribution of the requirements and instructions is unfortunate because, in addition to the formal

presentation of the work linguistic and other features also determine the final evaluation of the theses. Therefore, in addition to the detailed formal requirements, it would be advisable to elaborate the content and language requirements in the thesis guidelines.

The questionnaire survey revealed that teachers believe that the reason for the students' inadequate academic works is that they do not have enough experience in writing and reading academic texts. Whereas reading scientific texts develops knowledge of scientific genres, helps to learn the terminology of scientific disciplines and to interpret scientific and academic texts; moreover, writing academic texts is also an effective tool for developing academic writing.

The difficulties in producing academic texts were also confirmed by the students. In their opinion, the biggest help for them is when the teacher shows/gives them the literature, sample text and feedback, and also the experience gained from reading and writing academic texts.

Another important finding is that students' and teachers' knowledge of the characteristics of a scientific text differ in several points. Students do not always value the same notes as lecturers, and this deviance can have a major impact on the poor quality of students' academic writing.

The results also showed that students use very few scientific genres during their university studies. They usually write a seminar paper, report, and less often a research project, essay. However, they almost never write an abstract, review, critique, recommendation, abstract, scientific review article or discussion paper. This result is also crucial because students cannot/does not develop their practice and experience in various academic genres if they typically use only one or two genres. In the future, it would be worthwhile show the students more academic genres than at present, to show them more specifically how to find a literature and cite the author/work and to take into account what are the difficulties and the helps for the students when they write academic texts.

Taking into account the results of the present research, the following main suggestions can be made for the teaching of academic writing:

1. taking into account the difficulties and problems of the students and adapting it to the teaching methodological culture;

2. to discuss issues of genre, and to learn/teach more about the genre of the thesis;

- objectification of text organisation;

3. alignment of the requirements of the works before the thesis, during the university studies with those of the thesis;

4. paying more attention on spelling and grammar

5. highlighting the importance of the reflection on visual elements;

6. revision and expansion of the thesis guidelines in the direction of linguistic-content features.

The results and the conclusions of the research listed above can contribute to the development of students' academic writing skills in the future. All this knowledge can be incorporated into the curricula of courses/aids/studies to help and develop academic writing. In addition, the institutional requirements for students' academic texts can be supplemented with these results and thus make them more student-friendly. This could make the work of both teachers and students easier in the future.

Bibliography

Arum, Richard – Roksa, Josipa 2011: *Academically adrift. Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Blaskó Ágnes – Hamp Gábor 2007: *Írás 1.0. Az ötlettől a jól strukturált szövegig.* Budapest: Typotex Kiadó.

Doró Katalin 2012: Tudományos nyelvi formulák angol alapszakos szakdolgozatok bevezetőjében. *Porta Lingua 2012, Szaknyelvkutatási irányzatok és alkalmazások: cikkek, tanulmányok a hazai szaknyelvoktatásról és -kutatásról.* Debrecen: SZOKOE. 27–34.

Gruber, Helmut – Huemer, Birgit 2016: Studentisches Schreiben erforschen und lehren: Grundlagenforschung und ihre Umsetzung in ein Kursprogramm. *ZFHE,* 11/2. 81–101.

Kurtán Zsuzsa 2010: Tudományos nyelvhasználat és pedagógia: a kutatási cél megjelenítése tanárjelöltek szakdolgozatába. In: Silye Magdolna (szerk.): *Porta Lingua 2010. Tudományterületek és nyelvhasználat.* Debrecen: SZOKOE. 171–179.

Rási Szilvia 2019: Hybridization of discourse concerning the titles of academic papers. *Acta Universitatis De Carolo Eszterházy Nominatae: Sectio Linguistica Hungarica,* LXV. 161–170.

Szilassy Eszter 2014: Egy felsőoktatási szövegalkotási felmérés tanulságai. *Anyanyelv pedagógia* 3.

Publications related to the research

The full list is available on the MTMT website.

1. Rási Szilvia 2023. Hallgatók szakdolgozatainak tartalomelemzése: egy próbamérés tanulságai. In: Bíró Csilla – Nagy Dóra (szerk.): *A Magyarságkutató Intézet Évkönyve.* Magyarságkutató Intézet, Budapest. (megjelenés alatt)

2. Domonkosi Ágnes – Imrényi András – Jánk István – Kalcsó Gyula – Ludányi Zsófia – Rási Szilvia – Takács Judit és H. Tomesz Tímea 2022. Problémaalapú anyanyelvi nevelés – használatalapú gyakorlatok. In: Jánk, István; H., Tomesz Tímea; Domonkosi, Ágnes (szerk.) *A digitális oktatás nyelvi dimenziói: Válogatás a PeLiKon2020 oktatásnyelvészeti konferencia kerekasztal-beszélgetéseiből és előadásaiból.* Eger: Eszterházy Károly Katolikus Egyetem Líceum Kiadó. 13–34.

3. Rási Szilvia 2022. Egyetemi hallgatók tudományos szövegalkotása az oktatói es hallgatói attitűdök tükrében. In: Nagy Dóra – Nagy Luttenberger István (szerk.): *A Magyarságkutató Intézet Évkönyve.* Magyarságkutató Intézet, Budapest. 355–377.

4. Rási Szilvia 2022. Metadiszkurzív elemek tanárszakos hallgatók szemináriumi dolgozataiban. In: Kocsis Ágnes – Szlávich Eszter – Varga-Sebestyén Eszter (szerk.): *Észlelés és előfordulások. Tanulmányok a 15. Félúton konferenciáról.* Budapest: ELTE, BTK. 97–113.

5. Rási Szilvia 2020. Possibilities and potentials in teaching writing. *ERUDITIO-EDUCATIO 15/2.* 23–33.

6. Rási Szilvia 2020. Language use and dialectal attitude of a Hungarian settlement in Slovakia. In: Rudolf Muhr, Ildikó Vančo, István Kozmács, Máté Huber (eds.): *The Pluricentricity of Hungarian.* Wien et. al., Peter Lang Verlag. p. 11–23.

7. Rási Szilvia 2020. Tanárszakos hallgatók szemináriumi dolgozatainak metadiszkurzív szempontból történő elemzése. In: Istók, Béla; Lőrincz, Gábor; Lőrincz, Julianna; Simon, Szabolcs (szerk.) *Tankönyvkutatás –fordított tankönyvek – kétnyelvűség. A Variológiai Kutatócsoport 9. nemzetközi tankönyvkutató konferenciájának tanulmányai.* Komárom: Selye János Egyetem Tanárképző Kara. 193–201.

8. Rási Szilvia 2020. A cím és a kulcsfogalom tudományos szövegalkotásban betöltött szerepe. In: Ludányi, Zsófia; Jánk, István; Domonkosi, Ágnes (szerk.) *A nyelv perspektívája az oktatásban. Válogatás a PeLiKon2018 oktatásnyelvészeti konferencia előadásaiból.* Eger, Magyarország: EKE Líceum Kiadó. 393–402.

9. <u>Rási Szilvia</u> 2019. Diskurzushibridizáció a tudományos szövegek címadásában, *Alkalmazott Nyelvészeti Közlemények* XIII(2): 165–175.

10. <u>Rási Szilvia</u> 2019. Metadiszkurzív elemzéssel a tudományos íráskészség tudatosságáért. *Anyanyelv-pedagógia* XII/4

11. <u>Rási Szilvia</u> 2019. Hybridization of discourse concerning the titles of academic papers. *ACTA UNIVERSITATIS DE CAROLO ESZTERHÁZY NOMINATAE: SECTIO LINGUISTICA HUNGARICA.* LXV. 161–170.

12. <u>Rási Szilvia</u> 2019. A címadás problematikája és a tudományos szövegalkotás oktatása az IPOO-modell alapján. *OxIPO – interdiszciplináris tudományos folyóirat* 2019/3, 25–38.

Conference presentations related to the research

1. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Egyetemi hallgatók szakdolgozatainak nyelvi elemzése.* 2023. április 20–21. PeLiKon konferencia (Jászberény).

2. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Hallgatók tudományos íráskészségének vizsgálata a szakdolgozataikon keresztül - egy kvalitatív tartalomelemzés tanulságai.* 2022. február 4.: Taní-tani konferencia (Miskolc).

3. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Tanárszakos hallgatók szakdolgozatainak nyelvi elemzése.* 2022. február 4.: Alkalmazott Nyelvészeti Doktorandusz Konferencia (Budapest).

4. Domonkosi Ágnes – Farkas Anett – Imrényi András – Jánk István – Kalcsó Gyula – Ludányi Zsófia – <u>Rási Szilvia</u> – Takács Judit – H. Tomesz Tímea: *Problémaalapú anyanyelvi nevelés – használatalapú gyakorlatok.* 2020. november 6–7.: PeLiKon konferencia (Eger).

5. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Tanárszakos hallgatók szemináriumi dolgozatainak metadiszkurzív elemzése.* 2019. november 22.: Tankönyvkutatás – fordított tankönyvek – kétnyelvűség: nemzetközi tankönyvkutató szimpózium (Komárom, Szlovákia).

6. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Metadiszkurzív elemek tanárszakos hallgatók szemináriumi dolgozataiban.* 2019. október 10–11.: 15. Félúton konferencia (Budapest).

7. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *Diskurzushibridizáció a tudományos szövegek címadása során.* 2019. január 23.: XI Miskolci Alkalmazott Nyelvészeti Konferencia (Miskolc).

8. <u>Rási Szilvia</u>: *A cím és a kulcsszó szerepe a tudományos szövegekben.* 2018. november 15–16.: PeLiKon I. oktatásnyelvészeti konferencia (Eger).